

**P**iles of thoughtlessly strewn garbage decorated the unfamiliar streets in Cape Town, South Africa.

On the sidewalk, two shoeless children played with an old car tire, rolling it routinely back and forth: an assumable daily pastime.

A feeble old dog sniffed lazily through a ripped open garbage bag dumped carelessly in front of a flimsy tin shack. A few minutes later, he was shooed away by a middle-aged woman in a ragged dress who proceeded to sort through the bag herself.

I stared unblinkingly, careful not to miss a beat, feeling anxiety quickly spreading through me as the word "home" struck a heavy chord in my heart.

I thought back ten deceptively short years earlier, when my life in Cape Town was ostensibly normal, untroubled by the poverty-stricken living conditions I now witnessed.

As a young girl, I felt the warm, dry summer sun shine softly on my already sun-kissed face as I raced confidently down the quiet neighborhood street on my bright orange and blue mountain bike.

My friend Mandy led the way on her older, less shiny

by Kelly DeVries

# finding HOME

A young woman's return to Cape Town reunites her with a long forgotten place.

My friend Mandy led the way on her older, less shiny racing bike, dark blonde hair blowing gracefully behind her. We pedaled on, past one of the neighborhood's two poorly-kept parks next to her house, flashes of the red jungle-gym and blue see-saw zooming by in my peripherals.

Across the street from the park, Craig's black Rottweiler barked menacingly from behind the wooden gate enclosing his backyard, and we pedaled faster.

Around the corner we pedaled, past the tall, white, cement walls that surrounded the white flats where most of the neighborhood troublemakers lived—troublemakers who we believed stole little Max right out of our backyard in broad daylight.

We rode on in silence, past the street leading to the busy main road where 7-Eleven stood, past the house-shop where I frequently went with the five rand that Daddy often would give me to buy a pack of Chutney Nik-Naks and an Orange Fanta.

We soared past the second, slightly bigger neighborhood park where little kids screamed playfully, around a

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Primary school students gather around Kelly DeVries.



Clouds shroud Table Mountain, the backdrop to the busy upscale Cape Town Harbor.



In the center of the Mosaic Ensemble, Kelly DeVries prepares to sing to a group of students.



Slums occupy the poverty stricken areas of Cape Town.





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couple more corners where neighborhood friends lived, finally making our way back to my house.

My brown, single-story, face brick house with a charcoal-colored roof stood on the corner with the metal green “Sandown Drive” street sign propped up in the grass, just inches from the pavement.

A tall brick wall extended out from the left side, where my mother proudly kept her beautiful vegetable garden. Facing the garden was my parents’ bedroom, the only window without burglar bars.

Had it not been for Aunty Carol’s threatening scream from across the street, my mother would have had two very unfriendly visitors jumping the garden wall and breaking into her bedroom window where she took a nap one quiet afternoon.

My bedroom faced the front of the house, where we kept an old, white birdbath—also stolen in broad daylight. In our various shades of brown stoned driveway stood a small green palm tree, leaving just enough room for my Dad’s dark-green Audi A4 and my Mom’s turquoise Toyota Uno parked in front of the living room windows.

Behind the black metal gate that secured our front door, our maid Unis made her way throughout the house, scrubbing the white tile floors and polishing off the glass kitchen cabinets, careful not to wake my parents and whoever had happened to crash on the couch the night before.

Sundays were her busiest day, after the all-night partying and craziness that took place almost every weekend at the DeVries household. At the tender age of 9, being around alcohol, cigarettes, and late night parties was a normal part of life.

My life here in my neighborhood called Ottery in Cape Town was different to the one I led in the upper class neighborhood of Wynberg, where my sister and I attended an all-girls private school.

Unlike most families in Ottery and surrounding multi-racial neighborhoods where children attended government schools, we attended a predominantly white school that my parents thought would give the best education along with various opportunities including sports, clubs and extracurricular activities.

Most of my friends at Wynberg were white and lived in beautiful, clean neighborhoods where every house had at least two stories with lots of green, well-kept land, and just about every other house had a pool.

While the chaos and racial segregation of apartheid through the early 1990s was long behind us, the difference in class still was quite clear. White people still make up most of South Africa’s upper class, with a considerable multi-racial and black population included.

Multi-racial people make up the middle class, again with a fair amount of white and black people included. And the country’s poor class is made up of predominantly blacks, living in what we call “the slums” or “townships,” made up of old, run-down houses as well as tightly compact, very poorly constructed tin shacks.

Women walk the streets in rags, their babies secured to their backs with long cloths. Children wander around barefoot, sent out to beg for food door to door in neighborhoods like Ottery.

They ask for a sandwich to eat or a meager 20c to take the bus to Belthorne. My mother was always

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**Before moving to the United States, this single-story, brick house on Sandown Drive was the house Kelly spent the majority of her childhood.**



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generous enough to spare a loaf of bread or a packet of sugar.

Quite often, my friend Danielle and I would make a day out of collecting old handbags, clothes, and toys from around the house to hand out to the “poor people” on the street.

While there was reasonable interaction between different races, discrimination and racism played a large part in the segregation

Fear and ignorance was instilled in us, whether or not it was intentional. Driving through places like Mannenburg—a mostly multi-racial neighborhood with a lot of gang activity—and Guguletu—which was predominantly black where hungry, jobless families roamed the streets—was considered foolish and just downright dumb by anyone who valued their well-being.

Robberies, rape and murder were not uncommon in these places. The rapidly increasing crime spurred my parents’ decision to relocate to the United States where my dad was offered the title of senior systems engineer at a Chicago law firm.

Our move to upper-middle class Naperville meant toys could be left outside without being stolen. Doors could be left unlocked, household alarms weren’t a necessity, and windows could stand bare with no burglar bars.

More importantly, family outings and sports games could replace frequent partying. By starting over at someplace new and completely unfamiliar, my parents quickly learned the value of money.

We’ve been here ten years now, and have visited Cape Town three times, each visit significantly different and more enlightening than the last.

Growing up being exposed to an occasional careless racial remark or joke, and now living in a place that is considered a “melting pot,” has provided me a better understanding of the world and just how little we know of it.

Until last summer, I thought I had it all figured out. I thought I knew myself well enough to know that race and discrimination no longer determined how I

viewed others, and how I viewed myself.

Not until my most recent trip to Cape Town in June 2008 did I realize how wrong I was and just how deep within me that fear and ignorance was instilled.

The trip was going to be exciting and unlike any other visit we had before. Not only were my parents, younger sister Sinead and little brother Logan going, but an elite singing group that I sang with back when I attended Waubonsie Valley High School—that my sister was now a member of—was going as well.

The group, called Mosaic Ensemble led by choir director Mark Myers, was a culturally diverse singing group made up of 12-16 singers, with a repertoire that included styles from all over the world.

One style the ensemble sang was South African tribal music. With Sinead and me from South Africa, and my mother working at the South African

Consulate in Chicago, the group was invited to sing at the 2007 South African Freedom Day Function.

Notables included the South African Consul General of Chicago. Several teachers from Waubonsie—including principal Jim Schmid and vice-principal Joy Ross.

After dinner,

speeches, recognitions and performances, Ross suggested that the group take a trip to Cape Town the following year. Little did we know that her mere suggestion would become a reality.

Excitement grew as we planned and raised funds for the long-awaited two-week trip. Ross and Schmidt got in touch with various schools (both private predominantly white schools, and poorer all-black schools) to arrange the concert tour.

They had even planned for us to set up an Internet café in one of the poorer neighborhoods. It was decided that the current members of Mosaic Ensemble would go and that an invitation would be extended out to the members of the previous year—myself included—who also had performed at the Freedom Day Function.

I was finishing off my freshman year at Columbia College in Chicago, eager to visit the place I held most dear in my heart, knowing that going back now

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at age 20 would welcome an entirely different experience.

Emotions ranged from pure excitement to anxiety as I was ready to embark on what I now consider the experience of a lifetime.

Arriving in Cape Town was like coming up for air after being underwater for one second too long. We greeted family and friends, drove down familiar streets, and even noticed a few slight changes from the previous visit.

For the duration of Mosaic Ensemble’s two week visit, my parents stayed with family, and Sinead and I stayed with the group in a five-star hotel on the Waterfront (one of South Africa’s most visited destinations, situated among spectacular sea and mountain views, glamorous dining and entertainment venues, and luxury hotels and residential areas in the heart of Cape Town’s working harbor).

We then would join the family and stay with them for one more week before heading back to the States.

Knowing just how incredibly classy and safe the Waterfront was comforted me, as I was well aware of the continuing crime occurring in the very areas my grandma, aunts, uncles, and cousins lived.

Knowing that we would be staying in those areas for the last part of our visit made me anxious.

We started out the week by meeting with the Leap School choir, an elite all-black math and science school where a select group of promising young children hoped to get a better education.

We stayed in touch with this group for the entire trip, going on outings with them and performing together at various locations.

Our first real performance took place in a small church in a township called Langa. Growing up, I was vaguely familiar with Langa, as it closely bordered the area in which my grandma lived. We entered the neighborhood slowly, the large coach bus making its way down the narrow streets leading up to the

church.

I stared vigilantly out the window, observing an area I only had heard about when I was younger, and would have been warned not to enter. To my surprise, it wasn’t so bad. Sure, most of the houses were run-down, and garbage lay scattered on the streets and grass was unkempt, but it was quiet.

Residents seemed to be going about their normal everyday business. Quite often, people stared at us behind the large tinted bus windows, undoubtedly wondering what tourists were doing in their neighborhood.

The church leaders and congregation were welcoming. We sat toward the back with our backs facing the entrance. I remained somewhat on edge, turning my head every time I heard someone enter from behind. I consciously prepared myself should anything remotely dangerous happen.

The service began with the preacher’s sermon as expected, though she spent significant time voicing her concern for crime, and particularly AIDS.

Behind her, a large canvas with the red AIDS ribbon illustrated the community’s growing problem.

I’d always been aware of the AIDS epidemic in Africa and the increasing

number of victims particularly in South Africa, but I had not known

that this was an everyday problem people were facing within a ten-mile radius of my house.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted as the preacher called us up to sing at the front of the church. We hadn’t even completed the first phrase of our first South African song when the entire congregation erupted into cheer and applause.

As if their problems were a thing of the past, they were overcome with immense joy and appreciation.

I immediately felt foolish because the problems I faced both in the United States and South Africa were minute in comparison to hardships these people faced daily.

Yet here they sat, smiles in their eyes, grateful for the lives God had granted them. I was slowly starting

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Primary school students in Guguletu encircle Kelly.

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to understand, but it was just the beginning.

The days following consisted of more performing, shopping in Green Market Square, riding the world-renowned Cable Cars, visiting the Lion Park, walking through a pit of crocodiles at the Crocodile Farm, eating at fancy restaurants such as the Moya, and engaging in touristy activities—most of which my family hadn’t experienced.

The trip to Guguletu came all too soon as we all filed onto the bus ready for another action-packed day. My sister and I joked nervously, telling our peers just how scared we were. Growing up, we had heard and used phrases such as, “Don’t get lost or you might end up in Guguletu,” or “If you’re naughty, I’ll send you to Guguletu,” all too often. No wonder we had our reservations.

Run-down houses, broken fences and tin shacks lined the streets as stray dogs wandered aimlessly, and weary residents stared at us through unfriendly eyes, some yelling and pointing.

We arrived at our destination, a community center that held an after-school program aimed at keeping kids out of trouble and offering alternatives to drugs and violence. We got off the bus, and were greeted by a program leader who warned us to stay in a group because the area was unsafe.

Sinead and I huddled closer, my heart pounding and my eyes darting about cautiously. It wasn’t until we entered the community center that I began to relax. The kids awaited eagerly with a look of excitement.

We introduced ourselves, sang a few of the South African songs, and were given a chance to mingle. I found myself engaging in conversations not about South Africa or poverty or race, but about music, books and sports—normal topics of conversation.

These kids may have lived in a dangerous area, but they were no different from us. In them, I recognized the same dreams, same fears, and same hopes for the future that I saw in myself.

I was still apprehensive on our next couple trips to Guguletu. We performed at a couple different primary schools, one in particular where we were given the chance to spend time with the kids. Their reaction to us being there was overwhelming.

Each member of Mosaic Ensemble had a little group of kids flocking around them, asking a million



*Mosaic Ensemble sings for a group of students in the town of Guguletu.*

different questions all at once, pleading for an autograph. Two adolescent girls made it their official duty to take me by the arm—one on each side—and give me a personal tour of the school grounds.

They chatted while pointing out their classrooms, the bathroom, and the teacher’s lounge and principal’s office, insisting that because I was a “special guest,” I was allowed in.

I lost track of how many arms and hands I signed, all the while trying to tell them, “I’m not famous. I’m from South Africa, you know.” But they didn’t care. To them I was someone, and to me that meant everything.

The last visit to Guguletu was by far the most eye-opening experience I had on the entire trip. This time, my parents joined us on the bus, their first time to the infamous township they too had once joked about.

Shortly after entering the township, a large group of school-aged girls dressed in matching majorette outfits formed several uniformed lines at the head of the coach bus, instruments in hand.

They led us down the streets like a formal parade, marching in step with the beat of their drums. Families watched from their doorsteps, waving and welcoming the Americans’ arrival.

To our surprise, this specific visit was expected and evidently anticipated by many of the Guguletu residents. I peered out from the bus in childish amusement. I observed my surroundings, relieved at the

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