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Capetown Meets Norman Through Public Television and Fund for Teachers Grant

(NORMAN) November 23, 2009 - Her students' documentary from Film Production class began "Oklahoma is in the middle of the country, Norman is in the middle of Oklahoma, and Norman High School is in the middle of Norman." Which is precisely what compelled Judith Blake to expose her kids to the global students with whom they will one day collaborate personally and professionally. Because she always bristled at intolerance of people "just because they are different," she chose a *very* different location to visit and film – Capetown, South Africa – in hopes of showing Norman High students their shared similarities with counterparts half-way around the world.

Armed with three videos depicting Oklahoma themes, Judith used her Fund for Teachers' grant to spend six weeks in Capetown, doubling as an ambassador for Oklahoma and an investigative reporter compiling film footage to share with her students back home. She and her camera attended a documentary film festival and visited public, private, colored and black schools. Through friendships made along the way, she also placed her three videos in the hands of the local public television station, which aired the films on life at Norman High, the history of Oklahoma and the loss of language among the Native Americans.

"I felt that as an Oklahoman, I took things specific to our culture, but I didn't appreciate the similarity between the two until I got there," said Judith. "The Dutch, German, and English "invaders" took over the land much like the British and French did from the Native Americans in our state. And the Afrikans and Zuni cultures struggle to maintain their indigenous language as do our Native Americans."

As historic and language issues began to blend, so did cultural perceptions. Students witnessed on the video daily life devoid of Ryan Seacrest or Angelina Jolie and Judith observed students with often loftier ambitions, despite their financial poverty, than those at Norman High.

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“The Kalicha Township near Capetown has no running water, bathrooms or sidewalks, yet they do watch Saturday Night Live and CSI on TV,” said Judith. “Their perception of America is pure Hollywood. After seeing our Norman High documentary, one student remarked, ‘I thought life would be very easy for a high school kid in the United States, but I guess being a teenager is not easy for anybody anywhere.’”

As for building bridges between teens on opposite sides of the world, Judith hopes her students will learn a thing or two from those in Capetown. “I now have higher expectations for my students. Kids whom I interviewed in South Africa seemed more polite and on task – the way students used to be. Seeing what South African students are accomplishing under the cold reality of poverty and racism has inspired me to renew my dedication to my students’ education. To solve the problems of this century, every student must learn, contribute and collaborate.”

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