Walking in solidarity and love

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with students Taylor Kennedy and Sage Wilson-Short

In April, seven Year 11 students and two teachers from Stiena College, Camberwell, went on a life-changing and enriching adventure to South Africa.

We travelled first to Johannesburg and then on to Tsakane to join Sr Sheila Flynn OP and the families of the Kopanang community.

Kopanang is a women’s community project that works to alleviate the impact of HIV/AIDS and endemic poverty in the township of Tsakane, situated 55 kilometres south-east of Johannesburg.

Tsakane is one of the townships that were created for workers in the goldmines in the area through forced removals of people in the apartheid era. Since the last mine closed in 2006, unemployment has hit more than 80 per cent of the population.

Most of the women of Kopanang have been deprived of an adequate education, further exacerbating their ability to survive and provide for their families. The community has also been heavily affected by HIV/AIDS. The Kopanang community project was set up to provide the women with a healing space to share their life experiences, their faith and cultural heritage, and to learn embroidery and craft skills to enable them to generate a small income.

From the moment we arrived at Kopanang we felt a feeling of hope and love. Kopanang means ‘gathering together’ and from the first day we could all see that it was a place of strength and hope for the women there who were suffering from poverty and the impact of HIV/AIDS on their families and community.

We received a wonderful welcome from our host mothers, with whom we would spend the next two weeks living.

We were welcomed into their families as if we were their children and told ‘not to feel at home but rather to be at home’. While living in circumstances that we were not used to—where facilities we take for granted such as hot water, indoor toilets and showers are not available—was a challenge, everyone overcame this and walked with solidarity and love with the people of South Africa.

The beautiful women of Kopanang and their families were a true inspiration; in times of great struggle, their strength and optimism always shone through— their immense trust and love of Christ were evident in everything they did. When times were tough for one of the women, they would pray together and support her, knowing that Christ was always there. Every day we witnessed their incredible courage and strength of spirit.

We were privileged to witness and support the work of Sr Sheila Flynn, who co-founded Kopanang and is an inspiration to all. We listened to the women talk about the impact that being part of Kopanang had on their lives. They spoke of the pride they now had being able to create the most beautiful embroideries and provide food for their families; the love and support they received from each other and their hope for a better future.

We provided help to the Sithand’izingane Care Project, located on the same site as Kopanang, which provides child care for pre-school children, many of whom are orphaned, a home-based support program for the sick, a feeding program, tutoring and after-school educational programs for the children and adolescents in the township.

We worked in the kitchen, helping prepare more than 300 meals for children (which for many may be their only meal for the day), tutored students in mathematics and English, taught and played with the children in the creche, and provided assistance wherever we could at Kopanang.

We were also moved by experiences such as distributing clothing and toothbrushes in the shanty areas and delivering crisis food parcels to families that had no money for food. These memories will never leave us, and neither will the gratitude that we have developed for our own privileged lives.

As part of our immersion in South Africa we also had the chance to learn about and explore the history of a country that had gone through so much and had come out fighting. We learned about apartheid and the struggle for equal rights by visiting Constitution Hill and the Apartheid Museum.

The memories of how much the people there have suffered and fought will forever stay with us and will inspire us to walk the path that God has set out for us with solidarity, not just for the people of South Africa, but for all those who are not as fortunate as us.

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