

Diary From SOUTH AFRICA

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*I*t is sooooo cold. Cold. The house has a metal roof, like a shed, and no central heating at all, so at night when it gets close to freezing outside, it’s close to freezing inside too.

I have extra blankets, but last night I slept in: socks, underwear, extra-long sleeve t-shirt, PJs (stuffed into socks for good measure) and my black cashmere sweater. Not the most attractive outfit, but I stayed warm all night. During the day it gets really warm and the sky is big and blue and beautiful – just like in Montana. Tomorrow morning I’m gonna get up early and take pictures in the neighborhood – it’s hard to take honest photos of the incredible poverty I live in, to post on my blog, without hurting my hostess’ feelings. Kind’ a like being embedded.

Those were the words I wrote in an e-mail to a good friend of mine, one week into my monthlong stay in the South African country of Lesotho. I was there from early September to early October 2006, working as an editor, reporter, English teacher and mentor at *The Public Eye*, a weekly newspaper located in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho.

One of the reporters at *The Public Eye*, Matahpele Ramanotsi, took me in. I shared her four-bedroom house with her, another roommate and a one-eyed man who looked to be about 100-years old and rented the back bedroom.

There was no running water in the house. No sink in the kitchen and no bathroom. In the morning, Matahpele and Libuseng (her roommate) would heat water for me in a large soup pot on the hotplate. I’d wash in that and a bucket of cold water from the faucet outside.

Yet the maid came every morning to do the wash. She spoke little English and referred to me often and loudly as, “Sister!” The first day I met her, she brought over her daughter.

“Here, look,” she said in broken English, “she has passport and school paper. She’s 18.”

The girl looked all but 14 to me, and she didn’t say a word.



Pia K. Hansen of *The Spokesman-Review* with her South African colleagues.

I smiled and praised her good grades. It wasn’t until days later I finally understood that this was a mother’s way of saying, “Please, madam, take my daughter with you when you leave.”

At the paper, I’d spend the best part of my day writing and editing, prepping reporters for interviews, keeping up on the blog I was writing for my own paper and working very closely with the reporters.

The only language we did have in common was English, but communication was tricky at some points: Not only was I a woman, I was a white one at that, and it took a while before the young men took me seriously. Yet once they figured out the news editor would look much more kindly at their stories if I’d edited them first, they started lining up at my computer eager to get my input.

Back at my temporary home, I had promised to pay for my own food, but I had to find a way of circumventing Mathapeli's watchful eye to do so. In Basotho culture, the host pays for everything, and me buying food (and toilet paper) could easily be taken as criticism of how Mathapeli provided for me. Once I figured out where the store was, I went shopping by myself in the afternoons, sparing her the humiliation of having me pay.

“The need,” he said, “is in Africa, but the money is in America. We just have to find a way of getting the two together.”

Then I made dinner as often as I could, producing various pasta dishes and a really, really good chicken curry – once I figured out how to cook without running water.

I got to travel all over the tiny kingdom while I was there.

From Maseru, I went to a tribal reunion in Mafeteng, to the annual arts and culture festival in Morija, and I drove all the way to the northernmost point of Lesotho – a road trip that took eight hours – to deliver magazines and newspapers in Quacha's Nek.

My trip to South Africa was truly an amazing adventure and I already have my eyes set on the next one. In early November, I got an invitation to join the staff at a daily paper in Malawi, doing the same mentoring and coaching as I did in Lesotho.



Adults draped in traditional Basotho blankets.

I want to go – maybe next year or the year after that.

The man who originally extended the invitation to me, Crosbey Mwanza, CEO of the Swaziland Institute of Mass Communication, is eager to have me come back.

At one of our last meetings in Lesotho, at the Maseru Sun Casino, sitting next to the pool eating roast beef and potato salad – as you can, if you have money – we hatched a dream of creating an exchange program between the South African region and the United States.

Funding is always an issue but Crosbey, who spent a dozen years going to college in the United States, explained to me that he finally got it:

“The need,” he said, “is in Africa, but the money is in America. We just have to find a way of getting the two together.”



A woman makes brooms to sell in her makeshift marketplace.

The United Nations Development Programme ranks 177 countries by a human poverty index that takes into consideration a citizen's chance for a healthy life, a good education and a high standard of living. From 1990-2003, Norway ranked number one, the United States ranked number 10 and Lesotho ranked 149.

The same report indicates that 36 percent of Lesotho's population lives on or below \$1 per day, per person.

A little more than 56 percent exist on less than \$2 a day.

Half of the population lives below the national poverty index.

You can still see my blog at:

www.spokesmanreview.com/blogs/safrica/