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Lessons from the young and restless

Where Do I Stand? is a documentary examining the response of young people caught up in the crisis of xenophobic violence

By Angelique Arde

Who can forget the terrifying face of xenophobia splashed across TV screenings and newspapers in May last year?

The haunting footage of Mozambican Ernesto Nhamuave being burnt alive, or other disturbing images – like those of laughing youngsters, some in their school uniforms, hurling bricks, wielding sticks and looting shops?

“Is this your South Africa?” asks filmmaker Molly Blank.

It’s an incisive question that the American journalist feels hasn’t been answered.

But it’s a question that she is posing to young South Africans aged 14 to 21, the leaders of tomorrow. Whether they were perpetrators or bystanders, in townships or in suburbs, what’s their take on what happened? How did they respond? How is doing nothing actually doing something? And if it happened again, what would they do? Would they behave any differently?

Beneath these questions are others that explore deeper themes of identity and what it means to live in a democracy and to value diversity, human rights and peace.

For the past two months Blank has been chatting with and challenging youngsters wherever she can gain access, from township schools to private schools on the peninsula. She has also interviewed young refugees in townships in and around Cape Town and in central Johannesburg.

Her goal is to make sure that conversations with young people are being had and to document their stories. “The youth need to hear their stories and so do we so that we may understand them.”

It’s a critical point considering that 50% of South Africa’s population is under the age of 23.

Ultimately, *Where Do I Stand?* will be used in workshops with teachers who will themselves engage in these conversations and in turn use the documentary in their classrooms.

The project is a collaboration between Blank and Shikaya, a non-profit organization that supports teachers in their quest to develop responsible, caring and active democratic citizens.

“Shikaya takes teachers on a journey of personal and professional change as they explore their role as change agents in their schools and classrooms, explains Dylan Wray, the executive director of Shikaya.

The non-profit organization does this through teacher development workshops and programmes such as the Anti-racism in Schools seminar for the Western Cape Education Department, the first of which was held in Hermanus earlier this year.

Shikaya’s main project is Facing the Past – Transforming our Future, which has proven effective in helping teachers examine the way South Africa’s past has affected them as individuals and educators.

By exploring the case studies of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and then apartheid South Africa, history is used to examine behaviour and look at what makes people perpetrators, bystanders and resisters and allows young people to connect history to moral and ethical decision-making.

About 200 teachers from 60 schools in the Western Cape have participated in the course - affecting nearly 15 000 pupils in history, life orientation and English classes.

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes of children, by role-modelling behaviour.

If they are inspired and compassionate teachers, they are more likely to produce inspired and compassionate citizens of the pupils in their charge.

Wray's hope is that *Where Do I Stand?* will inspire compassion in viewers and provoke them to think. "We want all viewers to be saying to themselves, 'That could be me.'"

Blank elaborates. "The film and the accompanying discussions will push young people to consider numerous perspectives and experiences of xenophobia, across both race and class. And it will give them examples of South African youth who opposed the attacks and took action to assist foreigners. Ultimately the film will offer young people the opportunity to explore the personal choices they made."

During her interviews with pupils, Blank has been moved by the honesty of the youth and the complexity of the issues with which they grapple.

"I've met many young people who participated in looting and were very upfront about it. But what surprised me were their reasons. We imagine only one type of perpetrator – bad people who hate foreigners. In fact, it seems more complicated. Many were xenophobic. Others say they did it for fun. They did it because their friends were doing it. They did it because they were angry. They did it because they were hungry.

"Whenever I interview youth, all these issues come up. They talk about race, unemployment, poverty, apartheid, the separate worlds in which we live."

Blank, who was the recipient of a 2005 Fulbright Scholarship to South Africa, is the director, producer and editor of acclaimed documentary *Testing Hope: Grade 12 in the new South Africa*.

For more details about this documentary visit www.testinghope.com