



**A MOVING DOCUMENTARY FOLLOWING FOUR BORN-FREES SHOWS HOW MATRIC IS SEEN AS THEIR TICKET OUT OF POVERTY**

**d**ISCARDED test papers and scraps of damaged textbooks blow across the dusty school grounds of Oscar Mpetha High School in Nyanga, Cape Town. Through the broken window panes of a classroom a teacher is seen talking to her matric class.

"The most important thing is confidence," she says. "If you're not confident, don't expect someone else to believe in you."

Her learners hang onto her every word, absorbing everything she tells them. They're determined to escape the poverty they've known all their lives – and the best way to do that, they believe, is to do well at school.

"This year is the decider," says Mongamo Tyhala (18), one of the matric learners with the highest marks. "Where you're going to be in 10 years all depends on this year."

Noluyanda Roxwana (18), another top student, agrees. "It's the last episode of school. It's the ticket to life, to a really good life."

This is a scene from a recently released, thought-provoking documentary called *Testing Hope: Grade 12 In The New South Africa*. It was filmed in 2005, the year the so-called born-frees – learners who started school in 1994 at the dawn of our democracy – completed high school.

It follows Mongamo, Noluyanda, Siphon Mpaku (21) and Babalwa Yabo (18) as they prepare for their final matric exams. In the film the learners speak frankly about their hopes and fears and the real meaning of matric for kids from one of SA's poorest communities. In Nyanga, a township off the N2 near Cape Town International Airport, unemployment is

almost 60 per cent and only one quarter of adults have completed Grade 12.

"I came here looking for a story to tell," says director Molly Blank, an American teacher who came to SA in 2005 on a Fulbright Scholarship, an international and cultural exchange programme run by the American Embassy, with the intention of making a film on education in SA.

She didn't just get a story – she lost her heart to a group of eager young people. Molly met Kholeka Buhlungu, the English teacher at Oscar Mpetha, at a weekend school programme in Cape Town and agreed to teach her students while Kholeka did a teaching stint in Germany.

She ended up teaching three Grade 12 classes for several months. She was struck by her new students' sense of hope and determination.

"What was so interesting was they didn't only want a better life for themselves, they wanted better lives for their families," she says.

The film is being shown at schools around the country to show young people the importance of education and finishing matric. The SABC is keen to air it on TV soon and it has been screened at documentary film festivals around the world. Yet as uplifting and inspirational as it is, the movie is also marred by tragedy.

HE was the first person in his family to do matric, Siphon says in the film. When he was 17 his parents divorced and he left school. "I dropped out and smoked drugs. I also drank a lot and did bad things – crime, you see – and got arrested."

But he decided to turn his back on a life "that will only lead to prison or death" and finish school. "In life the thing I fear the most is not passing matric," he says in the documentary.

He did pass and although his marks weren't good enough for him to qualify for maritime studies he took remedial physics and maths classes in the hope of being



**LEFT (film strip from left to right): Scenes from the documentary *Testing Hope* – Babalwa Yabo doing her chores; Siphon Mpaku studying; Babalwa (back left) and Noluyanda Roxwana (front right) in class at Oscar Mpetha High.**

accepted for his dream course one day. A life at sea was his ultimate goal.

After you watch the film, the scenes with the bright-eyed young man linger in your mind: Siphon serving porridge for himself and his brothers before school, brushing his little brother's hair as the early morning sun filters into the sparsely furnished flat. Finally, Siphon running through the streets of Nyanga after receiving his results, whooping, "Life is good, life is LG!"

Barely two years later Siphon was stabbed and shot six times by gangsters on the streets of Nyanga. After a week on life-support he died in Groote Schuur Hospital. "His killers were never caught and we'll never know why he had to die," his older brother, Moses, says. "Now every time I miss that guy I put on the DVD, watch him, listen to him and am proud of him."

For the other three young people featured in it, the movie has proved to be more than something to remember their dead friend by.

"It opened doors for me," soft-spoken Mongamo says. He too passed matric and, although he didn't get into civil engineering at the University of Cape Town as he'd hoped, is studying maths and statistics at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), on a bursary he won thanks to the film.

Mongamo, Noluyanda and Babalwa regularly join Molly at screenings of the documentary at education faculties around Cape Town. At a recent screening for the

sociology of education class at UWC, Mongamo was loudly applauded when he walked into the room after the film ended.

When he was asked to speak, Mongamo had a powerful message. "You've made it," he said. "You're here at this university but you might have gone to schools like the one in the movie. Go and give back. Tutor. Play soccer with the kids."

Noluyanda turns 21 this month. She did well at school and wanted to study law but then she fell pregnant. Her son, Lonwabo, is now one. She's now studying political science at UWC on a bursary awarded by a corporate sponsor.

"I'm glad I waited till after matric before I got pregnant," she says. "I don't regret anything. My mom and my son's dad are both very supportive of my studying. I chose political science because it's closer to my interests at the moment. And it's not far from law." She smiles. "My family is not rich but education is very important to them, because it takes us further away from poverty."

Her friend Babalwa (now 20), had hoped to study medicine after matric but wasn't accepted into medical school. She's now studying mechanical engineering at Cape Peninsula University, also on a bursary, and is just as excited about her new career choice as she was about becoming a doctor.

"All the hard work in matric prepared me for my life as a student," she says. "The

**LEFT:** Molly Blank, who directed the documentary, with Mongamo (left) and Siphon. **BELOW:** A recent photo of Molly with (from left) Noluyanda, Mongamo and Babalwa.

bottom line is: without matric, doors to a professional career won't open for you."

**NOMINATED** for best short documentary at the prestigious Oxford Film Festival in England, the movie has also become a powerful instrument to show how the education system sometimes fails the born-frees and other learners. "People have the right to be angry and frustrated in places like Nyanga," Molly says.

Dumile Mawisa, principal of Oscar Mpetha High School, admits there are challenges, such as motivating learners and teachers. However, his school's matric pass rate improved from 37 per cent in 2006 to 66 per cent last year, thanks to holiday school programmes and a motivation camp.

Basic skills are a big problem in education, a Johannesburg literacy and skills expert says. His company's study of top high school learners whose mother tongue is an African language found that over 30 per cent had English communication skills below those of a Grade 7 student.

"These kids are pushed through lower grades by overeager teachers. Often their lack of readiness catches up with them in Grade 12 and at university and they flounder," he says. "The only way to prevent a further crisis is to make sure primary school kids are properly taught to read, write, do arithmetic and reason and put knowledge into practise."

But Penny Vinjevold, deputy director general in the Department of Education, believes things are looking good. "We have more pupils passing matric, more girls finishing matric and more kids getting into university."

She says government could do more to help young people enter the workforce by creating opportunities and encouraging them to study practical courses. And companies could help by giving internships to young people after graduating.

"Entering the workplace is life-changing," Penny says. And Mongamo, Babalwa and Noluyanda can't wait. □

# Learning for a BETTER LIFE

**EDUCATION IS VERY IMPORTANT; IT TAKES US FURTHER AWAY FROM POVERTY**

