

The Mandela Magic

After fifty years of world wandering journalism Jeff McMullen goes back to South Africa with AIME, the Australian education program that aims to end inequality at home & abroad.

The Mandela Magic still hangs over South Africa. The giant of hope, unity and political aspiration still whispers to the country that we can all make a difference to humanity.

“We all bear a responsibility to change the poverty, unemployment and inequality,” says Swati Diamini Mandela, the granddaughter of Nelson and Winnie Mandela, sitting in her Johannesburg home. “There are so many things that are wrong. I don’t want my eight-year-old daughter to live in a violent city and a nation where people are unequal.”

Young and beautiful, Swati’s name means ‘hope’ and it was chosen by Nelson Mandela. “My grandfather used to say, “When I retire I am handing it over to you and to make a difference we need to educate all children everywhere.”

Given her global role in the fight against poverty, Swati Mandela delivered this week a stunning endorsement of AIME, the Australian education program that aims to end inequality at home and abroad.

“We need a spirit of genuine volunteerism. AIME inspires everyone in the education space,” she said, “the high school student, the teachers, the university mentors and the communities from where the most disadvantaged youth come from. My grandfather always said that education for all of our children was the best way to end inequality in our world.”

Nelson Mandela’s mantra, that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” is one of the most famous phrases of the 20th century. It is also a constant inspiration for the unstoppable 21st century generation that drives AIME (Australian Indigenous Education Experience), Australia’s leading mentor program. Jack Manning Bancroft, the Aboriginal university graduate who kicked off AIME in 2005, frequently talks about Mandela to the thousands of Indigenous kids and their university student mentors now showing that education can destroy inequality.

Mandela's words are ringing in my head as I travel in South Africa for the first time since filming the great man at Sharpeville in 1993. Back then the lion of Africa was striding a platform surrounded by a huge mass of people, every colour in the rainbow, drums and singing, hope but also palpable fear. Police vans and guns were trained on the rally but I smiled as I watched that political giant hold up his hands and hush the few young ANC (African National Congress) hotheads who were firing their guns into the air. The man who would soon be President won over that crowd with the sheer force of his personality and conviction, telling them that the revolution was theirs to win or lose, depending on their discipline. "Madiba, Madiba," they chanted his clan name with love and respect. Mandela led his people in a song of victory and put a gleam in the eye of South Africa's youth, making them believe that their time had come for freedom and equality.

In Johannesburg and Pretoria today the streets are full of the restless, the poor and the unemployed. Despite the government's program to improve housing and create jobs, South Africa's 55 million people, especially the young, experience one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world. Primary and secondary education is in crisis with millions of the poorest children in the least resourced public schools falling way behind the elite in the private schools.

The 'Born Frees', the youth born after Mandela's victory in 1994, are increasingly disillusioned and disappointed because among 15 to 34 year olds, about 48% are not in work, education or training. If ever there were an opportunity for the power of AIME mentoring then this is it.

Around the world over the next few months AIME is holding a contest to attract ten brilliant young leaders of the future. They will come from Africa, Asia, Europe, Canada and the United States. Can these young men and women from different nations in varying stages of development persuade their universities to link their undergraduates as mentors to kids in the poorest schools in the land?

To win AIME'S 'Golden Ticket' and be trained for this opportunity 'to help change the world, a young South African man or woman must win over their university hierarchy, just like Jack Manning Bancroft did at Sydney University and the seventeen other Australian universities that followed over the past twelve years. In Australia, the AIME hoodie, blazing with Aboriginal student designs, is a sign of

change, extraordinary progress where there had been so little all of my lifetime.

As I visit South African universities as a global Ambassador for AIME I tell them that this is the most hopeful education movement that I have seen in fifty years of travelling the world as a journalist, author and filmmaker.

Professor Norman Duncan, Vice Principal Academic, at the University of Pretoria, is keenly interested in backing AIME's mentoring approach because he believes it will allow individual undergraduates to make a significant difference. With 60,000 students across three campuses and access to some of the poorest schools in the black townships the idea of youth helping youth has strong appeal.

"This is a hard country. We need to develop in our university students a caring for our country and a belief in human rights."

In Soweto, with young colleagues from AIME, we walk the crowded streets on National Youth Day. June 16th 1976 saw the massacre by police of 176 youth including the twelve-year-old, Hector Pieterse whose death is captured in the striking photograph that towers over the memorial where hundreds of people lay flowers and take pictures.

AIME'S Adam Hansen, a former teacher, an Aboriginal man from Perth, Western Australia, is powerfully affected by the history of defiance. For Xavier Masson-Leach, the AIME photographer, it is a moving, memorable day of craziness and excitement as people stream through the simple brick abode where Nelson and Winnie Mandela lived, taking 'selfies' and smilingly linking their lives to those revolutionary aspirations.

In Soweto, we see grown women dressed up in school uniforms to remember the defiance and the courage of the 15,000 students who marched through these same streets, igniting the revolution. People are singing and dancing in the streets. This is a day for young people but the tins shanties on the outskirts of Soweto, still there two decades after my last visit, are just one of many reminders of the enormous challenges of achieving equality.

“AIME can help build the spirit of volunteerism that is needed in every area,” says Swaiti Mandela. “I think it is truly needed here and AIME will find the young South African women and men to lead, as well as the right people in the universities to build this bridge to a better world.”

Jeff McMullen, AIME'S wandering Ambassador, is a former foreign correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and reporter for Sixty Minutes Australia.