

Reflection

Teachers Across Borders South Africa. The name evokes images of adventure and service. I was excited by the possibilities of traveling literally halfway around the world to interact with educators from different states, as well as Southern African educators.

I got more than I bargained for in the process.



Photo: Yunus and his wife, Laurie. A TABSA power couple.

Yunus Peer. A passionate man who is living a promise that he made to his parents to give back to his South African people. He is quiet, reflective, and thoughtful. Yet, a force to be reckoned with in his efforts to actualize his program and in his promise to keep his teacher volunteers safe. His commitment and determination to serve the educators in South Africa was quite simply, humbling and inspiring. I haven't met many people in my life who I would call inspiring. Yunus Peer is inspiring.



Photo: Some members of the TABSA family.

The TABSA team was made up of a hodgepodge of different educators from around the world. Our ethnic mix, age span, and educational experiences varied. We came together with a common goal of serving educators in South Africa and looking for a little adventure. Through hardships, laughter, adventures, meals, song, as well as spending 24/7 together for almost a month, we emerged a family. Each unique Individual has left a lasting mark on my heart.



Photo: TABSA team with the Free State Minister of Education and administrators.

Each week interacting with our South African colleagues was memorable. The opening ceremony was attended by many important administrators. I felt welcomed and a little nervous about what I was about to embark on. Once in our classroom, my partner teacher and I introduced ourselves to a sea of friendly and curious colleagues. As each of our colleagues shared, their individual personalities and passions were revealed. Most were strangers to each other, as they had come from all directions near and far within the Free State. Many admitted to initially being disappointed that they had to give up vacation time to attend TABSA. They also missed their families, as most were staying in hotels far from home. Yet, by Thursday of each week my teaching partner and our South African colleagues felt a little sad that we would no longer be together. Many colleagues were smiling and interacting with each other as if they had known each other for years. The shared learning experiences, the risk taking, the time spent each morning singing songs, sharing a Bible verse, and praying together had resulted in a powerful community of educators who were committed to continuing to learn and support each other. As each week came to a close, I noticed friendships that formed over the course of our week together. With the use of WhatsApp, a digital community was created so that they could all continue to share and support each other. There were plans to share their knowledge, skills, and resources with other colleagues at their schools. I witnessed passionate educators become passionate teacher leaders. Each week I felt a little sad. I knew that I would miss these new friends. However, I felt an incredible sense of gratitude to have witnessed the powerful way that TABSA can renew passion and inspire educators to continue to share and grow together. Seeing the impact of the work that we had all done each week, would be like watching grass grow. You can't immediately see results, but before you know it the growth would be evident.

The learners in their classrooms are so fortunate to have teachers who are risk takers, life long learners, and who are collegial. I felt good each Friday knowing that these colleagues will undoubtedly make a difference at each of their schools.



Photo: Free State teacher leaders



Photo: University bound students with their new laptops

In Thaba Nchu, we met learners from the School for the Blind. The learners who greeted us were warm, friendly, and full of hope for their future. A young lady proudly proclaimed that she was planning on studying Economics. At the community center we met many learners who ranged in levels from the youngest to those going to University. Each learner was attentive, respectful, and incredibly patient throughout the ceremony. At times I would catch a curious gaze and a shy smile. During the ceremony each university bound learner was gifted a laptop. They confidently stated their future educational plans, as their community proudly watched. These children, living in extreme poverty, had hopes and dreams, just like the children that I teach back home. What struck me the most was the gratitude, the pride, and the warmth behind each smile. I was humbled and moved as I greeted and spoke to the children and families from this community.



Photo: Young learners in Thaba Nchu

I expected to provide service to others and have an adventure when I signed up for TABSA. What I gained from this experience is hard to distill into simple words. In essence, I have a deep respect and love for South Africa and the people that I interacted with each day at the hotels, on our tours, and the members of the Free State educational system. I have a profound respect for my Southern African colleagues, who despite varying challenges, have a deep passion and love for the art and science of teaching. My heart melts each time I think of the children at the Thaba Nchu Community Center. I have gained a family, our TABSA team. I have had the honor and pleasure of working with Yunus Peer, who I can honestly refer to as one of my heroes. A humble, passionate educator who made a promise and has dedicated 18 years to honoring his parents. A man who lives what he holds dear to his heart.



Photo: With new friends.

The partnerships between the TABSA team and South African colleagues allows both to act as agents of change. Teachers Across Borders South Africa embodies the elements of passion, heart, and commitment that bind committed educators from around the world.