Coming to understand

Above: A Katatura shebeen *(bar); zebras at Etosha National Park; and students sing for the delegation at Hanganeni Primary School in Swapokmund, Namibia. In the background: Dune 7 in the Namib Desert.*

Namibia

by Laura Behling

Photographs by Bonnie Reimann

It's complicated, this country on the southwest coast of the vast African continent. A country slightly more than half the size of Alaska, Namibia has only .99 percent arable land in its hot, dry climate, and is bordered in the west by the Namib Desert, and on the east by the Kalahari Desert. Yet it shares more than 1,500 kilometers of coastline with the Atlantic Ocean. The literacy rate of Namibians is high, 84 percent over the age of 15 can read and write, yet 55 percent lives on only $2 each day, and 34 percent of the population lives on only $1 per day. The adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is 21.3 percent, yet water is potable right out of the taps, not only in its capital city, Windhoek, but throughout the nation.

Namibia's natural resources are considerable; most are buried below the surface of the earth: gem-quality diamonds, copper, gold, lead, tin, lithium, cadmium, and zinc. At Rössing Uranium, for example, an open pit mine about 60 kilometers east of the coastal resort town of Swakopmund, excavation provides about 7.6 percent of the world's uranium production. The mine is a delicate geopolitical partnership: the majority of shares in Rössing are owned by Rio Tinto, an international conglomerate headquartered in England and Australia, yet Iran owns a 15 percent stake in the company, and the government of Namibia only 3 percent of the shares. Namibia was the first country in the world to incorporate the protection of the environment into its constitution, and now 14 percent of land is protected. Still, it suffers from limited fresh water resources, desertification, wildlife poaching, and land degradation.

Namibia is 80–90 percent Christian, employs English as an official language, has a centuries-long history that is inseparable from the Western world, and, in the past year, has found itself in the news as a safe haven for

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Editor's note: *Service Learning for Social Justice is a Faculty Development Program started in 2002 at Gustavus Adolphus College. It provides an opportunity for faculty to study global social justice issues and learn about the pedagogy of service-learning in order to enhance student learning. The seminar in Namibia was the fourth such seminar; previously, faculty traveled to Northern Ireland (2002), Guatemala (2003), and Cuba (2004). About 75 faculty have now benefited from this program, which has been supported by the Faculty Development Program's Bush Foundation grant, with assistance from the Center for Vocational Reflection's Lilly Foundation grant, the president's office, the academic dean's office, and the Sponberg Chair of Ethics.*

The Gustavus faculty group at Rössing Uranium Mine near Arandis, Namibia.

Hollywood stars looking to escape the paparazzi. Yet it still often finds itself on the fringes of global consciousness. But not for 20 Gustavus faculty and staff, who traveled to Namibia for a two-week faculty development seminar as part of Gustavus' Service Learning for Social Justice program.

The seminar offers faculty an opportunity to study the literature and theory of social justice, to implement this commitment and service-learning in their courses as a pedagogical strategy, and to reflect about the theory and practice of civic engagement for themselves and Gustavus students. Namibia was the fourth iteration of the program, previous groups of faculty having focused on social justice and human rights issues in Northern Ireland, Guatemala, and Cuba.

Michele Koomen, assistant professor of education, was one of those making the two-week commitment. She admits: "To be honest, there were times where I thought I tiptoed around the big issues with my students, always being concerned that they might ask me a really deep question that I was unable to answer. Now, I feel stronger and more confident to embrace social justice in a more thorough manner and across all of my classes . . . for me, this experience was pedagogy changing."

Eric Dugdale, assistant professor of classics, concurs. "My experiences in Namibia have brought into sharper focus many themes that we explore in the study of the ancient world. I always have believed that the ancient world offers a safe 'lab' environment to explore modern issues, but I was surprised by how much contemporary issues can enhance my thinking about the ancient world."

"the place where we don't want to settle"

The recent history of Namibia is marked by genocide, battles over identity and ethnicity, apartheid, nation-building after independence, and today, struggles and successes with reconciliation. Jade McClude, archivist at the Namibian National Archives, traces the colonialism of the country to 19th-century medical and scientific theories, such as those espoused by Francis Galton. The British scientist's expedition to southern Africa in the 1820s mapped the land geographically and its people eugenically. The Germans entered the area in the late 19th century and, through a series of treaties, established boundaries that had no relation to the tribes that lived there, thus creating a colonial hierarchy of White, Black, and Colored in a state known then as South-West Africa.

This is a history that Noreen Buhmann, director of the Community Service Center at Gustavus, shared with her family. They "had no idea that Namibians suffered from eugenics and concentration camps some 20–30 years prior to the Holocaust," she recounts. "Each member of my family simultaneously felt a connection, a shared humanity, a distant relationship with the Namibians."

South Africa occupied this German colony during World War I and annexed the territory after World War II. In 1966, the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO), a Marxist guerrilla group, launched a war of independence for the area, which was then renamed Namibia. Not until 1988 did South Africa agree to end its administration in accordance with a United Nations peace plan for the entire region, which won Namibia its independence in 1990.

Independence, however, has not salved this historical trauma or eradicated racial or

economic injustices. "We characterize the independence of African countries as nominal," Paschal Kyoore, associate professor of French, explains, "because the former colonial powers and other Western countries continue to control their economies, their politics, and even their social life in many ways." As McClude says, "It's just rubbish to say apartheid is over."

During the decades prior to independence, apartheid separated different ethnic groups around the country in a divide-in-order-to-conquer strategy. Blacks were segregated into distinct living areas, were punished or jailed if they left this region, and were required to have a pass in order to travel across segregated borders. In Windhoek, Blacks were moved into an area called Katatura. Before apartheid's end, they could only eat black bread or use brown sugar, as a psychological reinforcement of their disenfranchised status. Priscilla Briggs, assistant professor of art, relates that her home-stay host mother "talked about how her schooling was limited to training in 'Home Economics' as a discipline of servitude." Prior to 1990, there was only one road in and out of Katatura, called Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse, and after 5 p.m. residents could not go into the downtown area. Not surprisingly, "Katatura" means "the place where we don't want to settle."

Today, Katatura is still divided by ethnic groups, and shanty towns of corrugated metal roofs and scrap lumber walls are springing up on the hills surrounding the

English professor Florence Amamoto (second from right) and art professor Priscilla Briggs (right) tie-dye shirts with children from Katatura's Hope Initiatives and Family Hope Sanctuary at the Center for Global Education, as part of a service-learning exchange.

What they learned—bringing Namibia back to the classroom

"I am going to complement my classroom content with a unique perspective and I am already yearning for more. This program has reinforced my thirst for knowledge and exploration, all the while attempting to break down disciplinary walls and bring us all together in an interdisciplinary perspective."

***Aaron Banks**, assistant professor of health and exercise science*

"I have so much more to tell our nursing students about the real problems of HIV/AIDS and the effect of this disease on millions of people. It is one thing to share statistics, but when you can tell the stories of people living with the disease, the unfairness of it coupled with their dignity, the compassion and initiative to do something about it is more compelling. I also have more resources to direct those who are interested in volunteering in developing countries, which seems to be of more and more interest to my students."

***Paula Swiggum**, associate professor of nursing*

"This experience will fit well with my teaching. Themes of social justice are a natural fit in a course on child development. Bringing into class the tangible example of a burgeoning nation trying to define and adjust to new issues such as poverty, orphaned children, health care access, and universal education will be a unique way to introduce and complement many topics covered over the semester. I think this also results in having students consider these issues globally as they pertain to all of human development."

***David Rudek**, assistant professor of psychology*

Boys near a rest stop between Windhoek and Swakopmund.

city. Racial apartheid, still prevalent, is now joined with a recognition of economic "apartheid" that dictates people settle where they can afford to live. Apartheid as an urban planning issue is "stunning" in its complexity, Phil Voight, associate professor of communication studies, says, and its "lingering effects on housing and income segregation" are readily visible.

Considering that the unemployment rate in Namibia is 38 percent, there is perhaps no better place to understand such disparities than in the costs of everyday items. As an exercise to help Gustavus faculty and staff understand the "overwhelming economic apartheid that still exists," as Briggs phrases it, we were sent on an economic quest in Katatura and asked to price basic staples, including a liter of milk and toilet paper, as well as luxury items such as a can of Coca-Cola. Visitors to Namibia often comment that "things are cheap," considering the cost of items relative to the cost of the same goods at home. Yet in calculating not only the actual cost for Namibians, but also the number of hours or days that a Namibian would need to work in order to purchase such items, the real costs—economic and human—become apparent. A liter of milk costs $6.95 in Namibian, the equivalent of $1.07 U.S. Given average wages, a Namibian would need to work 2.3 hours to make the purchase. Toilet paper, about 33 cents U.S. per roll, costs $2.14 per roll in Namibia, the equivalent of 40 minutes of work. The can of Coca-Cola is $4.79 Namibian, about 74 cents in the U.S., and would require a Namibian to work 1.5 hours in order to afford it. If the buying power in the United States and Namibia were equal, such that a U.S. minimum wage earner had to work the same number of hours as the Namibian in order to purchase the same item, economic disparity comes into sharper focus. That liter of milk would cost the U.S. worker $13.16, the roll of toilet paper $3.90, and the can of Coke $9.02.

June Kloubec, associate professor of health and exercise science, noted these

economic realizations most acutely during her home-stay with a family in Katatura. The poverty appeared "grinding," she explains, and detailed her stay with a family of one mother, two daughters, two grandchildren, and a lodger in a three-bedroom home. "I calculated that I make more money in one month than my host mother made in one year working full-time as a cleaner at the local hospital." On the first night, Kloubec relates, "we had to go out and buy more electricity lest we run out."

Yet the demeanor of Namibians is overwhelmingly positive. "Although there are a myriad number of challenges facing the everyday lives of Namibians," Assistant Professor Aaron Banks, Kloubec's colleague in health and exercise science, notes, "there is a spirit that is contagious." It is evident in a remarkable woman who became known to us as Auntie Clara.

Auntie Clara was trained as a teacher, but quickly realized her community of Katatura, her country, and her own sense of self needed more from her. Despite having what she characterized as a "difficult childhood," Auntie Clara has taken in neighborhood children who have no home, including one boy whom she characterizes as being "bruised inside." With her own, her house now buzzes with the energy of 16 children. As a woman committed to education, she realized that too many children are prohibited from attending school because they lack the money to buy the required

Health and exercise science professor June Kloubec negotiates with a street vendor in Windhoek.

"Professionally, the most significant experience for me was visiting several schools; there was so much obvious inequality in equipment and facilities (and therefore opportunities) among the Blacks, Whites, and Coloreds. I saw the familiar motivation and excitement that sport and physical activity bring to children, but not having basic needs fulfilled can affect physical aspects of children. I can share these experiences and insights with students and encourage them, as future teachers, to think critically about the diversity and background of their students."

***Bonnie Reimann**, assistant professor of health and exercise science*

"This experience reinforced my beliefs that it is important for our students to be exposed to diversity issues and global perspectives, to think about their relationship to the rest of the world. I will be able to bring a new first-hand international perspective to my discussions of diversity and global issues in classes and advising, but it also challenges me to think more about how I want to incorporate the insights from this experience into my life, both professionally and personally."

***Florence Amamoto**, associate professor of English*

"This program has reinforced my belief in study abroad, particularly in developing nations. I was profoundly affected by what I experienced during our fortnight in Namibia, and I know that this experience could never be reproduced in the classroom alone."

***Eric Dugdale**, assistant professor of classics*

"There are several features of this program that I will incorporate directly into my courses. I will, for example, use the information and advice that I gleaned in Namibia to create a service-learning module for Gustavus' India SJPD Program."

***Phil Voight**, associate professor of communication studies*

"I'll incorporate the lecture by Namibian archivist Jade McClude directly into my classes. What I found fascinating was his analysis of

At a weavers' shop in Windhoek; all the weavers are Black, but the woman who runs the shop is a White German.

uniforms. In order to help right this economic disadvantage, Auntie Clara has set up a business in her home that inexpensively sews uniforms for children so they can afford to continue in school. As Paula Swiggum, associate professor of nursing, describes, she was one of the many people we met who "looked around, saw they had little to nothing in terms of material wealth, then looked around them again and saw their neighbors suffering or wanting. They became bigger than themselves in a selfless desire to meet another's needs." For Auntie Clara, Katatura, once known as "the place where we don't want to settle," is now "where the life is." She stresses that Katatura is now reached via Independence Avenue. The real life," she professes, "is here."

"living with a positive-thinking mind"

Jeni Gatsi-Mallet, Namibian representative from the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, has been HIV-positive for 15 years. Initially, she wanted to live long enough so that her young children could take care of themselves. Assisted by accessible medical care, she now wants to live to see her grandchildren, although she is quick to point out a further reason for her body's ability to hold HIV in check: "I am living," she says with a remarkable double entendre, "with a positive-thinking mind."

This personal perseverance of Gatsi-Mallet and Auntie Clara, their discovery of

their own strength and their own abilities, and their conviction that one person can make a difference in the lives of neighbors and strangers prompted us all to consider the paradoxes of an often-difficult life tempered with the "positive-thinking" minds of Namibians. "We saw people living in crude houses made of several pieces of sheet metal with no electricity or running water," David Rudek, assistant professor of psychology, remembers, "while we walked past smiles on almost every child's face. We saw images and heard stories of brutal colonization and were amazed by the willingness of the indigenous people to forgive their oppressors. We listened to municipal officers, organizational leaders, and citizens of the country who were brimming with confidence about the future of their young nation yet were forthright about their anxiety at the present social and economic duress."

As is the case in so many sub-Saharan African countries, the pandemic of HIV/AIDS looms as a significant social problem for Namibia. Recent surveys have shown a decline in HIV/AIDS prevalence, although this does not necessarily mean there has been a decline in new infections, or that women, men, and children are finding ready medical care. Only 25 percent of eligible HIV patients are now under antiretroviral treatment. In 2004, 19.7 percent of pregnant women tested positive for HIV; by the year 2021, projections suggest that life expectancy will drop to 46 years old for people with AIDS, while those without AIDS are expected to live to 64. In 2001, studies showed 97,000 children were orphans or made vulnerable because of the pandemic. Projections for 2021 more than double that number to 250,000 children, a burden that will fall on family elders, social service agencies, and religious organiza-

Prospective day laborers wait by the roadside in Katatura, hoping that someone looking for workers will pick them up.

the colonial photographs, and I will add these images to a lecture I give that analyses the Abu Ghraib prison photographs within the context of war photography and links those photographs to early 20th-century American postcard photographs of lynchings. These photographs all are a strong visual representation of a colonial mindset in which power and curiosity/oppression of the other can be related to both tourism in developing nations and the invasion of Iraq."

***Priscilla Briggs**, assistant professor of art*

"I teach a First Term Seminar titled "Managing People in the Public Sector." The course focuses on public administration, more precisely human resource management. I always have wanted to incorporate material on other countries, particularly developing countries, and with the materials I collected while in Namibia, I will be able to do this. In my women's studies course on African women writers, I'll use my experiences to characterize the challenges of Namibia with the following statement: "It's all about managing the clash between tradition and modernity."

***Paschal Kyoore**, associate professor of French*

"I teach a course on intercultural communication, and we spend time discussing colonialism and cultural imperialism. Much of this discussion, however, is very general in nature, and many students see colonialism as part of history, not part of the contemporary world. I'll now be able to include a section that focuses on Namibia, covering the history as well as the current implications of colonialism where the white Germans live with the Black Africans. I want students to move beyond just understanding the concepts associated with colonialism to seeing the far-reaching effects of it, and a clear and current example of colonialism will help students better understand and interpret concepts."

***Patricia English**, assistant professor of communication studies*

"Because our pre-service teachers will be working with students who are less privileged than they are, I believe my experiences in Africa can help students to understand the interacting forces that create poverty inertia. While some of the issues of race may be very different here than in Namibia, the rural

tions, like the Shalom Centre outside Windhoek.

The Center empowers disenfranchised children to attend school by providing school fees and uniforms; teaches them computer skills, sex education, and hygiene; and offers them three meals each day. As Paschal Hakizimana, the pastor who founded the Center in 2002, matter-of-factly admits, "Everybody, every day, has challenges in life." Although he confesses that he could not help those who were dying, "I could," he continues, "help the next generation." Such a commitment to serving orphans and vulnerable children is impressive, notes Florence Amamoto, associate professor of English, as was "his message of hope and support for them. But even more, the church service [we attended on Pentecost] was set up to be empowering as the children themselves ably led both the service and the music."

We entered through rolled-up metal garage doors into a sanctuary made of concrete and stucco walls, a cement floor, and a corrugated metal roof. Directly outside behind the altar area was a pile of soccer shoes, all black except for one red pair, and a couple of pair of black pants hanging on a clothesline. Inside, the space was filled with children, the older ones on chairs, the youngest on a blanket in the front, and the air enlivened with a repeating melody played on an electric keyboard and guitars. "I felt more of a spiritual presence among the children there," Bonnie Reimann, assistant professor of health and exercise science, says, "than I have in most churches."

The text for the day was from Matthew 5, and the hymns ranged from "O Come, All Ye Faithful" to "When the Saints Go Marching In" to "Amazing Grace." And although Hakizimana focused the sermon on the question "How big is God?" the boy and girl who led the service—with the spirit-filled call of "God is good" and the response of "All the time"—embodied the "positive-thinking minds" we saw so much in Namibia. "In this unpretentious place of worship," Barb Zust, associate professor of nursing, says, "I felt utterly humbled by the children's palpable hope and faith. As we were asked to reach out and hold hands with one another at the end of the service, I was profoundly moved by a feeling of universal closeness with the children, with the people of Namibia, and with my colleagues."

"it's simple, isn't it, to do for others, rather than do for you"

We had scheduled a day for Gustavus faculty and staff to work with and learn from Namibians involved in two social service organizations—Hope Initiatives and Family Hope Sanctuary—"so that someone from America can get to know a child of

poverty we see in our region is the result of many of the same factors we saw in Namibia: people of color, newly found freedoms (immigrants), matters of access to knowledge and power, disease, and hunger. Through our NYSP and ChYLI programs I have seen school children who live in substandard housing, have little or no access to healthcare, and have adults in their life who have little or no education."

John Clementson, *chair of the Department of Education*

"The particular experience that was most significant to me did not occur in Namibia but would not have occurred if I hadn't been in this program. After the seminar, I was able to visit South Africa and spend time with a former student who has made her home in Cape Town and who has devoted herself to helping young people. She credits her Gustavus experience with giving her an intellectual perspective from which to interrogate her own status in this new environment, and that ability has been crucial as she works to bring together young people from the White, Colored, and Black communities. In talking with her, I was reminded that what we do at Gustavus and specifically what I do as a teacher matters to our students and is a tangible element of their later success."

Mariangela Maguire, *interim dean of the faculty and associate professor of communication studies*

Imagining Namibia

Dunes and diamonds. Apartheid and AIDS. Politics and people. Namibia, slightly more than half the size of Alaska and resting on the southwest coast of the vast African continent, often finds itself on the fringes of global consciousness. In a photo exhibition at the Arts Center of St. Peter, Gustavus Adolphus College faculty and staff imagine the country and its citizens in all of their complicated beauty. The exhibition is free and open to the public.

Imagining Namibia
November 16 to December 24, 2006
Arts Center of St. Peter
315 S. Minnesota Avenue
St. Peter, MN 56082
Gallery hours:
Tuesday–Sunday, 1–5 p.m.
Thursday, 1–8 p.m.

Reception at the Arts Center
on Saturday, December 9 from 2 to 5 p.m.
(refreshments served)

Okahandja Park," as Patricia Sola, founder and director of Hope Initiatives, explained. But we had not planned on a polio outbreak while we were there—precisely where we were to go in the communities. Yet, the metaphorical nature of the disease suggested exactly what our time at these two organizations was to be: a way to understand the humanitarian paralysis that often grips us, a time filled with human-to-human contact, and an experience of humanness that was infectious.

Hope Initiatives was established in 2004 to respond to the difficulties experienced by people living in squatter settlements, especially the increasing numbers of orphans and vulnerable children, and people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The organization runs a soup kitchen and a youth literacy program, as well as the Ombili Bridging School, aimed at helping children who have had to drop out of school due to economic or social concerns to re-enter the government school system. Family Hope Sanctuary, begun in 2003, works to assist families infected and affected by HIV/AIDS and those who are in vulnerable situations by providing a psycho-social support group for people living with HIV/AIDS, a weekly soup kitchen for orphans and vulnerable children, a youth group to teach healthy living and positive choices, and a family craft center to teach life skills.

That both of these groups focus on supporting people affected with HIV/AIDS is not coincidental, and is more personal than just the high rate of infection in the country. After telling the story of her brother dying from AIDS, Patricia Sola told us she realized the necessity of providing a safe place for children to learn and grow. Sola returned from studying in England and started Hope Initiatives with £2,000 from her savings, operating from a tin shack during the first couple of years and beginning the soup kitchen with two pots. She worries now about sustaining the initiative, admitting, "It's very hard to look in the faces of the people and say we'll be here next year, but not knowing how we'll be there." Still, what motivates her is genuine: "It's simple, isn't it, to do for others, rather than do for you."

For Patricia English, assistant professor of communication studies, the conversations with women served by Family Hope Sanctuary's HIV/AIDS support group proved powerful. "I tried to imagine what their lives were like on a daily basis. I wondered at their resilience and discovered how much their faith in the group helps them continue on. I wondered what in the world I could teach them or how I can even begin to understand their situation." Yet, as we all continue to learn, to come to understand the complexity of this country on the southwest coast of the vast African continent begins with a willingness to experience and imagine its importance in the global consciousness. And then? We follow the lead of Hope Initiatives' founder, Patricia Sola. "The thing I found out," she admits for herself and, perhaps, for these Gustavus faculty who now take these experiences into their classes and communities, "is that I couldn't sit at a desk any longer."

Zebras and springbok roam freely in Etosha National Park.

Associate professor of English Laura Behling has taught at Gustavus since 1999. She contributed a story on the unfolding AIDS crisis in Tanzania as a Mayday! Conference preview in the Spring 2006 issue of the Quarterly. *Accompanying photographs were taken by Bonnie Reimann, assistant professor of health and exercise science, unless otherwise indicated. To see more of her Namibia photos online, go to* ***www.ahc.umn.edu/bjsc/paper/*** *and click on "Slideshow" in the lower left column.*