

# Chatham Courier

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## Literacy way across the world

*Students share videos, photos and more with South African pupils*

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**CHATHAM TWP.** – Students from divergent cultures discovered that the desire to learn is universal after participating in a yearlong global literacy program that collectively solidified students at the Chatham Day School on Shunpike Road with students at the Thabisile Primary School in Soweto, South Africa.

A school-to-school program designed to share global awareness and issues with students half-way around the world saw the Chatham Day School (CDS) on Shunpike Road partner with the Thabisile Primary School in Soweto, South Africa, in a year-long partnership promoting literacy and multiculturalism, which enabled middle school students in both countries to expand their collective worldview through shared videos, books and correspondence.

On Monday, May 19, students in the fourth and sixth grades at CDS and the Global Literacy Project (GLP) celebrated the completion of their yearlong partnership during an award ceremony at the school in Chatham.

The school's Headmistress, Pamela Fiander, was presented with a plaque by GLP's President Olubayi Olubayi for CDS's efforts. It read, "Global Literacy Project, Inc. gratefully acknowledges Chatham Day School for extraordinary commitment to global citizenship and for helping the children of Thabisile Primary School, Soweto, South Africa."

Reflecting on the school's effort, Olubayi said, "Global citizenship entails committing one's self to learning how to live productively and peacefully in a world in which one must interact with and work with strangers. It means accepting that those distant strangers are our siblings and that we have a mutual moral responsibility to share global resources with them. The fourth grade and sixth grade students at Chatham Day School have completed a series of projects and activities that merit the Global Literacy Project Global Citizenship Certificates. It is wonderful to see young people at CDS communicating with young people in Thabisile, South Africa."

The students and Donna Greco, teacher and director of community services, were also honored

with recognition certificates and recognition of commitment to global citizenship respectively.

## **Global Awareness**

Through the efforts of GLP and the South African school, teachers at CDS integrated global issues and awareness and incorporated the history of South Africa into the school's social studies and language arts programs.

And at the Thabisile Primary School students and teachers were steeped in the real culture and mores of the students from New Jersey - an eye opening experience for the children.

CDS students sent "culture packets" to the students at Thabisile portraying in detail ordinary American lives belying the supposed American lives projected to the world through television, movies and the media.

"As members of a social institution you are taking Chatham Day School in a direction that embraces the assumption of larger responsibilities," said Denniston Bonadie, vice president of program development for GLP. "As individuals you've accepted to become instruments for improving society. As human beings, you've decided to become global citizens."

The result of the yearlong project proved to students on both sides of the world that they had more in common than not.

Christina Vanech, a junior at the Pingry School in Bernards Township and a co-founder of the school's GLP Club and instrumental to the coordinator of the project that introduced GLP to the Chatham Day School, said of her visit to Thabisile, "What I experienced there has changed the way I view the world and my place in it. GLP has given me faith in the power of one person, or one group, to make a change. I sometimes feel overwhelmed with all the problems with the world, and so as eager as I am to make a change, I become frozen with no idea where to start. I have now realized that all you need to do is act. You don't have to make sweeping contributions to make a difference; you just need a mission and an understanding of what you will face."

## **World Issues**

Students at both schools studied the educational efforts of Nelson Mandella, apartheid and the civil rights movement in the United States.

They reflected on Mandela's 1994 speech about the Soweto uprising where he said, "We should first and foremost, approach it from the point of view that the heroes of those struggles had a noble mission. They were inspired by a thirst for knowledge knowledge which knows no color, knowledge acquired through persuasion and hard work, knowledge that taps talents and releases creative energies and knowledge that puts South African youth on par with the best in the world."

CDS students also learned that where secondary and higher education is almost a given in the United States in Soweto entrenched poverty, HIV-AIDS and extremely poor living conditions

prevent this dream from materializing for the majority of Soweto students.

Edward Ramsamy, secretary of GLP noted that South Africa is on the mend after decades of repression under apartheid and the resulting less than equal educational system in the country's rural poverty-ridden regions are struggling to gain a foothold in mainstream society - notably the Thabisile Primary School.

“One of the major challenges for South Africa is to overcome a legacy of unequal education,” said Ramsamy. “One of the chief architects of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, infamously said ‘There is no place for Africans in the European community above certain forms of labor.’ While the country has made impressive gains since the transition to democratic rule in 1994, the effects of apartheid continue to plague South African society. This is especially true in education, as the majority of South African children are educated in conditions of deprivation and neglect.

“Thabisile Primary School is one of the thousands of predominantly African schools in South Africa that is trying to reverse Verwoerd's perverse design for the African population. The Global Literacy Project has included Thabisile as part of its literacy initiatives to help the school provide a first-rate education to its students and to enable them to become productive citizens in the new democratic South Africa. We are delighted that Chatham Day School has joined us in this initiative. I am sure students from both schools will benefit greatly from this exchange in the future. The school-to-school initiative will have a long-lasting impact on both the Chatham and Thabisile communities.”

A large portion of the CDS efforts took advantage of the student's material abundance by donating valuable resources, such as new and used books, a camcorder and computer to the South African school.

A communitywide book drive, mounted by students from the Pingry School, The Willow School in Gladstone and Far Hills Country Day School, saw a community-wide book drive gather well over 57,000 from 50 organizations in 5 counties.

“It was great for me to see the school-to-school program take off at my brother's school, the Chatham Day School. The previous year, the children were thrilled to learn about South Africa and donated many books for the trip,” said Vanech.

Vanech, one of 26 volunteers and GLP officials who traveled to South African last summer, helped transform an old storage building in Soweto into a community library and stocking it with the books collected in the United States.

On the heels of this year's successful school-to-school program Greco has determined to visit South Africa in August to prepare for a second school-to-school literacy program at CDS.