

# BEYOND TRAUMA

By Cheryl McKay

Can two weeks change lives? You will hear a resounding “yes” if you ask the 17 faculty, students and alumni from Regent University’s First Response Trauma Team who went to South Africa to work with the Basotho tribe.

Regent professor Dr. Benjamin Keyes and his team made their first trip in summer 2009. They were well prepared because of extensive training before the trip—training in helping people deal with issues such as grief and loss, trauma within the family, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Besides participating in higher education classes, team members got certified through Green Cross Academy of Traumatology courses, taught by Keyes. While the Red Cross focuses on physical needs during crises, the Green Cross helps with emotional needs.

Regent faculty members joining Keyes included Dr. Merrill Reese and Dr. Joseph Francis, both assistant professors, and Keyes’ wife, Kim Harris, an adjunct professor. “The vision for the team is to go where we’re called,” says Keyes, “to be able to respond to the needs and to go places that God calls us to.”

They chose Qwa Qwa as their first mission, working with Thrive Africa, an organization that equips leaders in their communities by focusing on relationships with God. They believe without that strong relationship, lasting behavioral changes are not possible. Keyes states, “The people of

Thrive Africa are missionaries who have a deep love for the people they’re working with ... Most of the missionaries who come in are from church and youth groups. Our group was new for them.” The Regent team’s approach was unique. They trained teachers and coaches—who work directly with the children and families of the region—to deal with trauma and abuse. As the team trained 120 of them on issues like domestic violence, they realized some were actually victims.



Team prayer before making a presentation to the Qwa Qwa School Board

Cassie Phillips is the coach development manager for Thrive Africa. Coaches are young adults with a passion for their communities who teach classes. Their young ages grant them a special connection to young people. Cassie says, “One of the biggest benefits I’ve seen from Regent’s work is the increase in confidence the coaches have displayed. They now have a deeper understanding that grief, loss, trauma and domestic violence happen

across the globe. This has intensified their passion to help students through difficulties.”

The stories of lives changed through these two short weeks are countless, including helping people deal with rape, incest, AIDS, family deaths and poverty. The trauma team visited hospitals, schools, churches and people whose homes are made of tin scraps. They planted vegetables, delivered Bibles and prayed with families.

Then, an unexpected opportunity arose:

a Mampoi school recently had lost its headmaster to a heart attack, and the students were struggling with shock and denial. The assistant headmaster of the school asked the trauma team to help. So they rearranged their plans to meet with more than 350 students.

Professor Kim Harris had a profound experience, taking over the headmaster’s science class. “I learned the students were in the classroom with no teacher,” Harris explains. “The headmaster’s writing was still on the board. Luckily

for me, they were learning about sound waves, and sound is part of the science curriculum I teach. I drew a wave up on the board, being very conscious of the headmaster’s handwriting, intentionally writing above it. About halfway through the lesson, a student got up from her seat and erased the headmaster’s writing off the board, making more room for me to use on the chalkboard. We continued the lesson. I found that these students were thirsty for



A view of the city of Qwa Qwa, South Africa

knowledge, but more importantly they were looking for a way to move past the grief they were experiencing. I felt very blessed to provide them with this opportunity.”

This trip allowed Keyes to watch his team in action after investing much time in preparing them for the work. “I ranged from a mixture of pride and amazement at how well they adapted their skills. They learned to be present with people in one-on-one, group or conference situations. They let people tell their stories. That’s where counseling starts.

We heard difficult stories ... It breaks your heart time and again, and yet these people are looking for hope.”

The team had to avoid personalizing what they were hearing and put the Basotho people first. Team member Laurena Kleckner, who received her M.A. in Counseling from Regent in 2009, knows what it means to set aside personal needs for others. The day at the Mampoi school hit home for her, as it fell on the third anniversary of her grandmother’s death. “God had to help me separate personal and professional—to be with these students in their moment of need. He provided me with this strength, and I was able to do His work in a moment when I was definitely weak.” She set aside her own pain for the students,

to help them understand they are allowed to grieve their loved ones.

Students and alumni who joined the team felt equipped and trained to handle the situations they faced in Africa. Kleckner says, “The training I have received in the M.A. in Counseling program and the extracurricular trauma team training gave me much to work from. I found myself reverting continuously to what I had been taught to help them.”

Another team member, Phil Myers, agrees that his M.A. in Counseling equipped him with skills and tools needed to connect with people. “A piece of my heart stayed in South Africa. The people were beautiful inside and out,” he says. “I admired their courage, strength and simplicity. My view of the world has been broadened, and my love and understanding of others has grown.” Sensing the impact they had, Myers hopes to remain in global ministry.

Jennifer Marion, Thrive Africa’s ministry administrator, knows the team’s visit has continued to have a huge ripple effect. “They were able to touch thousands of lives,” Marion says. “Educating the nationals who constantly encounter hurting students facilitated immediate results. The people who attended the counseling sessions will be using what they learned to influence, impact

and help those who need it most on a daily basis. They left a long-lasting mark on the people.”

The trauma team hopes to train others interested in this type of work. They envision a continuing program for those with a heart to make a global difference—whether they choose to be involved for two weeks, two years or longer.

“I truly believe that we each can make a difference as individuals,” says Keyes. “Sometimes it’s a small difference, sometimes giant. In our short time there, we saw people changing their outlooks, changing their focus ... and there is much more work out there. We want to encourage other schools to develop trauma teams like this. Can you imagine 200 to 300 schools

doing this annually? You’d have so much hands-on work being accomplished.”

Two weeks may seem like it’s only enough time to contribute a small piece. But when the small pieces are put together, they add

up to a major difference—to the life of the missionary and every life they touch along the way.

For Regent University’s First Response Trauma Team, this trip to Africa was just the beginning. —



Government housing in Qwa Qwa



Church service in Harrismith, South Africa