

Pingry Encourages South African Speaker to Share Her Story of Resisting Apartheid



Left to right: Chloe Carver (III), her sister Emma Carver (V), Caroline Setsiba, Headmaster Nat Conard, Christina Vanech (V), and Emeka Akaezuwa, a GLP board member

After meeting Caroline Setsiba, Speaker of the Randfontein Municipality of South Africa, Form V student Emma Carver believed strongly that Mrs. Setsiba should visit Pingry to share an episode in her life that she had recently started discussing after 30 years of silence—the story of her leadership of the Soweto Student Uprising on June 16, 1976.

Thirty-thousand black students protested the government's decision to use Afrikaans in their classes, a language that was associated with apartheid and considered oppressive.

Mrs. Setsiba, 15 years old at the time of the uprising, attended Deliwonga School where she was a member of the 1976 Students Representative Council. Because of her position on the council, she became a planner for the march. On June 16 at 4:00 a.m., she arrived at school in uniform.

The students, who had not told their parents about their planned demonstration, began to march slowly and quietly. "All you could hear was the sound of our shoes until the police arrived," she says. The students retaliated against the tear gas thrown by police by throwing stones, chanting,

and continuing to march. Hundreds of students went missing, were killed, or were arrested.

Pingry students, parents, and staff met Mrs. Setsiba in the summer of 2007 during their visit to South Africa in conjunction with the Global Literacy Project (GLP). "On the last day we were in Johannesburg, she came and told us her story," Emma says. She, her sister Chloe (III), brothers Sean (6) and Reeve (6), and their parents Anne DeLaney '79 and Chip Carver Jr. '77 were among the volunteers on the trip, along with Christina Vanech (V) and her mother Denise.

Christina and Chloe both say they were enlightened by Mrs. Setsiba's story. "Coming from a country that values learning from first-hand accounts of history, it was very strange to me when Madame Speaker said that she had never told her story to anyone. The fact that she is able to share her story and insight helps people have a better understanding of apartheid," Chloe says.

The students felt that Mrs. Setsiba's appearance would be well-received, and that it was important to hear her messages about the leadership of

women, resisting apartheid, and forgiveness. "Caroline had to forgive a lot of people, including the people who shot and paralyzed her brother and the people who shot and killed her classmates. She knew that, to represent all the people of South Africa, she had to forgive and move forward," Anne says.

After the uprising, Mrs. Setsiba continued to fight against apartheid and was arrested and jailed several times. She was held in solitary confinement in 1981 and 1984, and she had her two-week-old baby in jail with her in 1984. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, she was a member of the Soweto Youth Congress and Congress of South African Students. Her political home is the African National Congress and, since her election as Speaker, she has protected the rights of opposition parties.

"Politics is my life, and my people are my life. I think that is what I live for, to make sure...that the objectives are achieved from what I started in 1976. The passion cannot die now. It's quite a huge responsibility," she says.

GLP sponsored her visit to the U.S., including Pingry. She took the time to meet with Psychology, Freedom, European History, World Religions, and U.S. History classes, giving the Upper School students the chance to learn about a part of history that may have been unfamiliar. "I was happy about the ability to link my presentation—my lecture—to the particular class that I was attending," she says.

Tom Keating, who teaches the Freedom course, was pleased that Mrs. Setsiba's visit coincided with the class's consideration of race relations. "That coincidence was invaluable because, both in our classroom and in the assembly, she was able to give us a personal perspective on many of the issues we had been discussing. Her story was a living embodiment for our students, and it greatly enhanced their understanding of a vitally important subject," he says. 🌟