

Lower School Students Become Pen Pals with South African Students

By Ann D'Innocenzo, Short Hills Library Director



Ann D'Innocenzo provides guidance to students at the Zuurbekom School in South Africa as they write pen pal letters to Pingry students

In the spring of 2007, I was invited to travel to South Africa with the Global Literacy Project to distribute donated books to schools and help build a library. To make a lasting connection between students at the Pingry Lower School and students in South Africa, I suggested a pen pal exchange program. I hoped it would offer reading and writing opportunities and, more importantly, promote an expanded world perspective and cultural awareness for our students. When our group visited schools in the Johannesburg area, I chose the Zuurbekom School as the best match for the exchange based on the similar grades in the school.

I traveled with about 200 letters that the Pingry students in Kindergarten through Grade 5 had written, and pictures of all the classes. The volunteers and I distributed the letters and photographs to the South African children, most of whom had never received a letter. I explained that Pingry is in New Jersey in the United States, and that our students had written letters to them because they wanted to be friends. Then, the Zuurbekom students wrote their responses and drew lovely pictures for our students.

We took pictures of each South African student so that our students could feel more of a bond with them.

Although most of the Zuurbekom students walked miles to school, did not have proper winter clothing, and had suffered personal loss to AIDS, they had beaming smiles and good wishes for their new friends at Pingry.

When I distributed the pen pal letters to our students, they were amazed at the South African students' extraordinary penmanship and beautiful drawings, and surprised by the Zuurbekom students' references to loving them although they had never met. After reading the letters and looking at the pictures, our students discussed the similarities and differences between their lives and the lives of the Zuurbekom students.

Our students decided to focus on the similarities when they wrote their responses. They wrote about their families, school, friends, pets, sports, and favorite activities. Although they shared similar interests, the Pingry students recognized that they are fortunate to attend Pingry, wear warm clothing, and live lives that offer many choices.

"I feel special to be writing to kids in Africa because not many schools do this. The children in Africa are about our age, and yet they are so different from us in so many ways," says fifth-grade student Jessica Li.

In February 2008, Laura Peppetta, literacy consultant for the Global Literacy Project, visited the Pingry Lower School and we presented her with our pen pal letters to take back with her to South Africa. The Pingry students now wait for more pen pal letters from their new friends from a different hemisphere, different continent, different country, and different world. Despite all of the geographic, economic, and cultural differences, it is amazing how much children have in common. I hope that the children from both locales will emerge from the pen pal exchange program with a deeper compassion for others and an expanded world perspective. ♡



Third-grade students wave to their new friends in South Africa. First row, left to right: Aaron Jacobson, Simone Allison, Hadyn Anidjar, Natalie Lijson, Hallie Lau, Julia Dannenbaum, and Natalie Lucciola. Second row, left to right: Anish Seth, Solomon Burt-Murray, Oliver Martin, Jamie Moore-Gillon, Edward Johnson, Scotty McGraw, Kai Holston, and Stephen Hricko. Third row: Kartikeya Sharma (photo by Melissa Van Duyne)