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Personal Statement

For the first time in my life I was in the real minority. Self-conscious about being white -- that was something new to me. My sister and I walked down the hallways of Sisulu High School, located in a poverty-stricken township in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. My sister had spent the last year in the area doing research on the spread of AIDS. She had become friends with some of the kids, and wanted me to see how African teenagers really live.

The students, dressed in identical green uniforms, stared at the two white girls in khakis walking like extra-terrestrials down the red-brick stairway of their familiar school. The kids seemed friendly and amused. Some laughed, others poked me in the arm and said, "Hi," and there was the occasional comment, "umlungu," (white girl.)

The principle, wearing a nice sweater and a charismatic smile, took my sister and me from class to class, introducing us as his "American friends who finally came to visit," even though we had just met that day. The kids were impressed and asked us lots of questions. One girl even wanted to know if I knew Mariah Carey. I had not expected to be treated like a celebrity, nor did I think we deserved such acclaim. If only they knew that the United States has many problems of its own.

At the end of the day, the gate that prevented kids from sneaking off during school was unlocked, and I walked through the township with my sister and her friend, Mapule. Mapule's house was an oversized tin box with one bed, two ragged couches, a dresser, a hot plate, and a radio. Andiswa and her mother slept together in a small single bed, and her two older brothers each had a tattered couch that was half their height in length. Her older sisters slept across the street in a neighbor's shack. The entire township was made up of similar multi-colored, dilapidated dwellings made from scraps of wood, tin, or cardboard. Along the streets, old women and men sat selling whatever food they could salvage -- everything from tangerines, to chewing gum, to roasted pig's heads.

Despite these harsh conditions the South Africans I met were quite hospitable and generous. Mapule offered my sister and me an orange as soon as we got to her house, even though she probably had not eaten breakfast that day. Mapule's family was fortunate enough to be financially supported by her oldest sister who was the manager of a Burger Derby. Traditionally, if one family member made a decent salary, they would spread the wealth throughout the entire extended family.

The following day, I went to a soccer practice with Mapule. She was an excellent player who could dribble so effortlessly, that if she had gone to Newton North High School, she surely would have been recruited by a Division I college. At the practice I noticed some of the girls were playing barefoot or in flip flops. Although they did not seem bothered, or particularly slowed down, I was aware of how much I had taken for granted -- purchasing a new pair of soccer cleats and shin guards every season since first grade.

My visit to Mapule's school and the township left me with a lot to think about. Mapule was smart, and even spoke three languages (Xhosa, Afrikaans, and English). She received good grades in her economics classes and wanted to be an accountant, but the sixty percent unemployment rate in her community makes it unlikely that she will ever succeed in that career.

As much as I admired the sense of community and sharing that I saw among Mapule's family and friends, it seems that being poor, with no real economic opportunity, exposes people to terrible dangers. I am still haunted by the young prostitute I saw in Capetown. At nine in the morning, she stood on the corner one block from our bed and breakfast, and pulled down her shirt, exposing her nipple to my entire family as we drove by. I was

utterly repulsed, but at the same time, felt tremendous sympathy for this girl who was probably my age. The shocking aspect was that almost everyone, including my family and the police, seemed to ignore prostitution. Was there really no other option for this girl? She seemed doomed to die of either starvation or AIDS. And what about Mapule and her friends? Was it possible they would be so poor that they might have to depend on a man who had the virus?

I began talking about my reactions with my sister, who explained that over half the people in the world live in conditions similar to those we had just seen. I realized that I was not just a minority at Sisulu High School, but a minority in the world. Being white was only the superficial difference. The real difference was that we had *money*, which meant opportunities, something many people will never have, no matter how intelligent or determined they are.

My sister also showed me that one person can make a difference, and for the first time I wanted to make a difference, too. I hope my college experience will help me decide what direction this might take.