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Jeffrey Barbee for The New York Times



Yanga Mentysi, 9, creates an illusion of levitation on the beach at Table Bay, South Africa. Young people from townships and squatter camps like Langa and Khayelitsha are among the students who learn tricks of the trade at the College of Magic in Cape Town.

Khayelitsha Journal

Presto! A School for Magic Creates Hope Out of Thin Air

By MICHAEL WINES

KHAYELITSHA, South Africa — Life is hard for the 750,000 or so people crammed into this shantytown, one of South Africa's largest and toughest. In the last census, in 2001, 6 in 10 adults here said they had no steady income. What little money they have tends to vanish quickly, spent on essentials or stolen in the break-ins and robberies that are endemic here.

The way Phumile Dyasi makes money vanish is rather less common.

"I want to show you this coin," he said one recent afternoon, standing in the tiny parlor of his family's plank-and-tar paper shack. He held out a copper disc. "Now, blow on it," he said. A visitor obliged, and the coin disappeared. Only Phumile's sly grin remained.

For six years, 16-year-old Phumile has studied prestidigitation at College of Magic in Cape Town, a sort of kindergarten-to-baccalaureate institution for aspiring conjurers. Making

coins disappear is the least of the tricks he has picked up.

From a shy 10-year-old who knew only Xhosa, South Africa's principal indigenous tongue, Phumile has grown to speak fluent English and handle audiences with aplomb. In 2004, he was chosen the best young magician in Western Cape Province. In March 2005, he was in Las Vegas, honing his skills with some of the world's top magicians. He hopes to make entertainment a lifelong career.

"When he performs, he's shocking," said Guy van der Walt, a one-time College of Magic student who now helps pay Phumile's tuition. "A lot of being a success in life, in many ways, is being able to have that self-confidence and that attitude. It's something that, every time he performs, he develops more and more."

The College of Magic will teach anyone the art of illusion — and indeed, it has about 90 paying customers this year. But the school's heart lies with impoverished children from townships and squatter camps like Langa and Khayelitsha, for whom a trip to its Victorian headquarters, with its performance stage and blood-red walls plastered with magic-show posters, is every week's highlight.

About 60 such young people are students this year. Their fees are wholly or partly paid by donors like Mr. van der Walt, now a 25-year-old animator for a London advertising agency, or by corporate sponsors.

"We have a special focus on disadvantaged communities," said David Gore, the college's 45-year-old director and founder. "We've never turned a student away. If young people wanted to study and were enthusiastic enough, we'd find a way to educate them."

Mr. Gore started the college in 1980, at age 19, while performing magic at children's parties to pay his university tuition. Although it was technically illegal under South Africa's apartheid laws at the time, the college's first class of 34 students was multiracial — something Mr. Gore calls an eye-opener for blacks

and whites who had never before worked together.

Magic, he says, has proved a leveler of the racial playing field because its skills are not just unrelated to skin color, but are displayed on-stage, where neither success nor failure can be explained away.

Mr. Gore entered law school and was drafted into the military. But by the time his hitch ended in 1985, he had decided that his career lay in magic, not the courts. The school began to expand its work with disadvantaged children, helped by corporate grants and, later, by the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

The rationale was that magic would inspire young people who could use a push on the road to a bet-

tege, but also schoolteachers, entertainers and others. Three years of Saturday-morning courses earn a junior diploma, though would-be entertainers can add classes in juggling, miming and other skills. Another three years of school, with a full-time schedule, concludes with a senior diploma and the status of an accomplished magician.

Advocates say the sheer length of that program, as opposed to the transient nature of many do-good efforts, only reinforces its benefits. Some of those benefits are two-edged. Young magicians can literally become neighborhood role models, but they can also become targets.

A skilled student can earn as much as \$85 for a shopping-center magic performance. One student who spent his earnings on clothes "had everything stolen from him," Mr. Gore said. "He ran home in his underpants." Three students have been stabbed in robberies, one fatally.

For others, however, the program is a savior. Phumile's sponsor, Mr. van der Walt, said that he grew up in privilege but had a deeply troubled youth. The college "gave me an amazing, amazing amount of confidence, and put me on the right track," he said. "It was my saving grace — it sounds corny, but it really was."

For a few, the college proves a gateway into an otherwise unattainable world.

Phumile, who lives near Khayelitsha's main shopping district, has one of the area's more fortunate families; his father, a hauler, owns a car. Yet he shares one of the two bedrooms, barely big enough for a hand-made bunk bed, with his sister and two brothers, and the house has neither running water nor indoor plumbing.

This year, Phumile failed to place in a national magic competition in Johannesburg. But one of the lessons he has learned is how to rebound from failure. He will be back next year, he said.

"I like the definition of magic," Phumile said. "It is to make the impossible to be possible."

With a little sleight of hand, race and class divisions can vanish, at least for a moment.

ter life. "We were seeing at the time the incredible benefits of magic training," he said. "We weren't just teaching tricks. The kids were developing a myriad of life skills."

That, of course, is the mantra of every group looking for charitable support. Yet it may not be so far-fetched: among other things, its proponents say, magic teaches patience, discipline and communication skills. Much of magic's appeal, from membership in a select society to the rapt attention of crowds, is a tonic for young people with little acquaintance with success.

"They'll start off with little tricks, by rote, showing them to the class over and over," Mr. Gore said. "And then they'll have that true moment, the one when they really do fool their mom and dad. They know it — that they can do it — and it really builds their self-esteem."

The classes are taught by volunteers — mostly graduates of the col-

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