

**“The problems with school is we don’t often get to think things out for ourselves. What the conference did was there in the title – we were thinking for a change!”** – Nadia Basset, acting president of Pupa (Pupils Unite for Peace and Awareness), an organisation with branches at 20 schools in Cape Town.



# W Cape pupils break down barriers

By Nic Borain

BY four on Friday afternoon on October 27, the 20 pupils who had spent a gruelling few weeks organising, were ready. The hall was decorated. The registration tables were prepared. The speakers, musicians, dancers and poets had all been invited and confirmed. It only remained to be seen if the pupils would turn up.

By 5pm the hall was filled with about 150 pupils from over 60 Western Cape schools. They gathered in communal groups and stared tentatively across at each other. Half an hour later, the black pupils were doing the toyi-toyi and many white pupils were starting to feel uncomfortable.

“At first it was quite hard,” said Nadia Basset. “We all come from such different backgrounds and we have such different life experiences. On that first night the organisers were worrying that the whole thing would be a disaster.”

Late into the night on Friday, after a provocative play by the Inter Church Youth and music from a marimba band, the pupils started to talk about their differences.

At first it was tentative, but later the debate became vigorous. Many white pupils expressed concerns about sanctions, violence and communism. The black pupils were, more than anything, concerned about being able to answer the questions

This set the tone for the conference. The next day, Dr Eve Bertelsen of the UCT English Department gave an audio-visual presentation on “How we come to believe the things we do.” Looking at advertising and

TV news footage, Dr Bertelsen identified the myriad subtle messages built into pictures. “How do photographers and directors try and make their message authoritative? By dressing up the man giving the message in a conservative tweed suit, giving him a pair of professorial glasses and putting him in front of a bookcase. We are meant to think he has read all of those books and therefore must be very clever;

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and therefore we should listen to what he has to say!”

This session challenged the fundamentals of ideas and beliefs and laid the groundwork for people to look with new eyes at other issues.

During the course of the weekend the pupils heard several other speakers and participated in workshops on Namibia, politics in South Africa today, the world in transition, culture and education.

“I think the highlight of the whole conference was the cultural workshop on the Saturday and then the party with Sabenza that evening,” said Nadia. “We learned so much about each other in a fun environment. We learned gum-boot dancing, the-

atre, poetry, silk-screening, clay moulding, songs (especially Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika) and it was just relaxed and I think it did more than anything in breaking down the barriers between us.”

Saturday night was taken up by a party. Like most teenagers, the conference participants just wanted to dance and listen to music. “When we were there we weren’t worried about whether we were black or white or what our backgrounds were. We just wanted to have fun and a rave together,” said Wendy Smuts, one of the participants.

Sunday afternoon was given over to the serious business of working out a programme of action for the white schools in Cape Town. The participants decided that the overwhelming priority was to establish solid functioning branches of Pupa in as many schools as possible.

“We have to become a well-established organisation, working efficiently side by side with others who have similar principles. At the moment we are trying to get representatives in each school who will be responsible for setting up a committee . . . We are living at a time when our country is going through so many rapid changes and developments that it is really important that young people get involved in thinking about the future . . . after all, the future is ours and we have a duty to make sure that it is the best possible future for us all.”

Any pupils from Cape Town who want to help with the establishment of a branch of Pupa in their school can contact Nadia Basset at telephone 686-3300.

Nic Borain is Regional Director of Idasa, Western Cape.