

# Scholars discover that exploring the past helps to build future

By MELODY EMMETT

*"I, you and they  
we,  
All gathered round,  
Talking, Asking, Looking  
... Recording the conversation,  
Time past  
which lights up today  
And tomorrow,  
Making it clear . . ."*

(From a poem by Antonio Mussapi)

The polarity between urban and rural communities is one of the most significant and yet least explored tensions of our national life. With this as its starting point, Idasa's Johannesburg office embarked on a process of consultation and planning with the aim of creating a student project which would not only be educationally exciting and thorough but would also attempt to address polarised interpretations of history and visions for the future of South Africa.

In the process it became clear that feelings run so high and the political problems are so sensitive that all along the principles of the planners (mostly urban people) had to be modified to accommodate the experience of those in the field (teachers and project leaders, students and residents in the rural areas).

The intensive rural history workshop which emerged was a compound created in the heat of these valuable confrontations. Held early in September in Lobethal, Lebowa, it encouraged democratic process in that working teams were made up of both urban and rural Standard 9 pupils and each participant needed to be heard for the programme to achieve its full effect.

The 40 participants included 20 scholars from English-language government schools in Johannesburg, 10 from St Mark's College in Jane Furse, Lebowa, and 10 scholars who are studying out of school hours with the Thushanang Study Project in Jane Furse.

For the Johannesburg group, the workshop began with the trip to the Lobethal Conference Centre. They were accompanied by student facilitators, most of whom are from Jane Furse

but are now studying under Leslie Witz at Khanya College, a pre-university college with campuses in Johannesburg and Cape Town. A detailed commentary had been prepared by the Khanya College students, the central theme being the issue of land. The effects of Johannesburg's mining revolution on rural areas, the homeland policy and the resistance to land dispossession in Sekhukhuneland were some of the issues that were discussed during the trip.

As the rural participants waited in anticipation for the combis to arrive, the generator at Lobethal broke down and the city scholars who finally joined the group were greeted with the news that there would be no electricity and probably no running water until the following day. For the Johannesburg students this was an

abrupt exposure to some of the constant concerns of rural people.

By the light of two hissing gas lamps Peter Anderson, principal of St Mark's College, opened the workshop by remarking on the significance of a meeting of such a diverse group of students. This in itself was an historical event, he said. During the session which

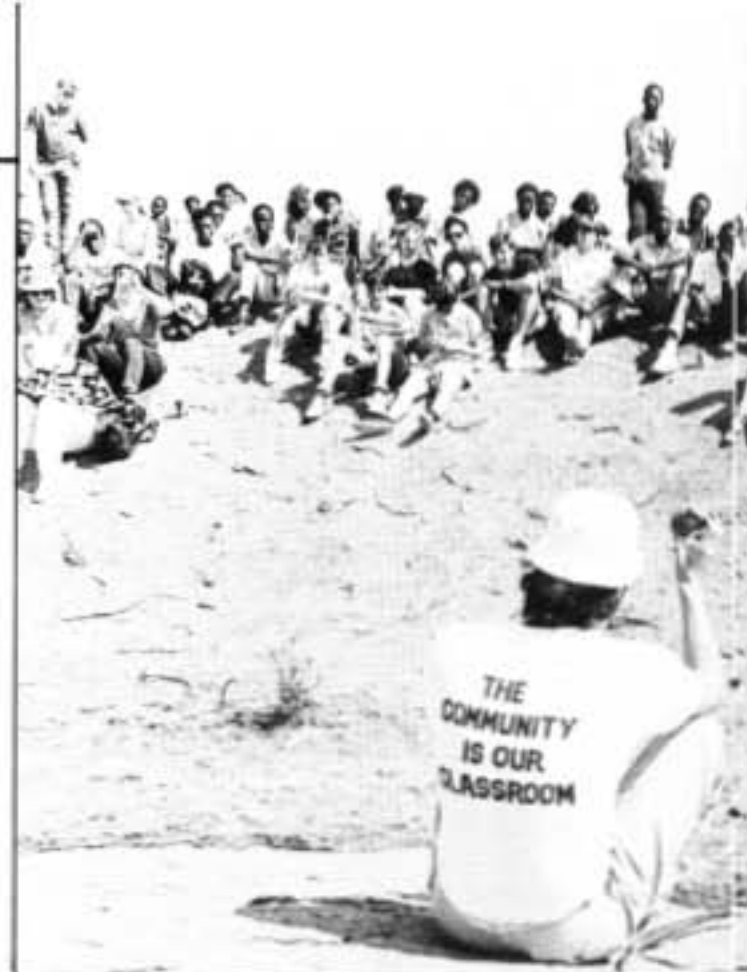
followed, consultant Tony McGregor facilitated a series of exercises which encouraged discussion between the apprehensive participants and established the working groups for the remainder of the programme.

On Saturday morning they viewed a slide and tape show, "Fight Where You Stand" which told of one rural woman's struggle to find work and accommodation in the city. Afterwards, Leslie Witz, assisted by facilitators from Johannesburg and Jane Furse, took participants through a process which would prepare them for the interviews which would take place in the afternoon. They were to interview women, youth and mineworkers from Jane Furse and surrounding areas. Each interviewing team devised appropriate questions which were reported back to the broader group in English and Northern Sotho. Questions and comments gave an indication of the interests and concerns of individual participants and of South African society at large: political and economic

The pupils prepare for their interviews with rural people.



Getting to know you . . . during a group meeting.



aspirations, hopes and fears, visions and values of the past and for the future.

The scholars returning from an afternoon of interviews and discussion were full of ideas. Each group had learnt something new — student politics, "trek passes", working conditions on the mines, the role of rural women. The feelings of anger, resentment, fear and despair which emerged in long discussions with facilitators late into the night reflected the complexity of our society and the issues which confront all South Africans in the process towards a non-racial, democratic and equitable society.

It was a subdued and introspective group which set off up Phahla mountain the following morning. En route, Thushanang co-ordinator Tony Harding pointed out the foundations of the houses of historical communities, Bushman paintings, the remains of clay pots and tools and other signs indicating the existence of ancient, self-sufficient, hunting and gathering peoples who occupied the area prior to the rise and destruction of the Pedi kingdom.

On top of the mountain the scholars shared ideas about prescribed history textbooks. One of the Jane Furse students explained that prescribed books give the impression that blacks

