

GCC alumna Terri Cappucci launches her own "Pay It Forward" effort in South Africa

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Terri Cappucci

Fans of the popular book and movie, "Pay It Forward," understand that acts of generosity can change the world if the recipient goes on to "pay it forward" to others. One GCC alum, freelance photojournalist Terri Cappucci ('93), has started her own chain reaction of generosity in the course of completing her thesis exhibition for her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Massachusetts. As a result, an 23-year-old young man, Mxolisi Fikaof, in South Africa will receive the education he needs to learn a trade.

"It really does work," says Terri, "[but] you can't just hand somebody money and say, 'Go to school.' You need to teach them along the way. And I was teaching him that this is how you get ahead: You work hard, you put your money in the bank, interest grows, and then I'm willing to help you by matching whatever you've put in.' It's not like I have lots of money, because I don't. But if you give, you always get it back somehow, even if it's by one person's life changing. His commitment to me is that when he gets out of school, he'll find somebody that needs to be educated and learn how to save money, and he'll teach them to do the same thing."

The friendships Terri formed with the people of South Africa grew out of a ten-year photo documentary project. Over the years she has made numerous visits to South Africa financed entirely with her own funds. She has witnessed the transition from apartheid to the first all-race elections, and has photographed leaders including Presidents Mandella, Mbeki and Kaounda, the former President of Zambia. Along the way, she connected with a non-government organization called Practical Ministries whose mission is to respond to the changing needs of people in rural parts of South Africa, from rebuilding violence-torn communities to foster-



"Family Shadow," by Terri Cappucci. Taken in the township of Shobashobane, South Africa.

ing entrepreneurship. When Terri met them in 1994, they were educating people to vote.

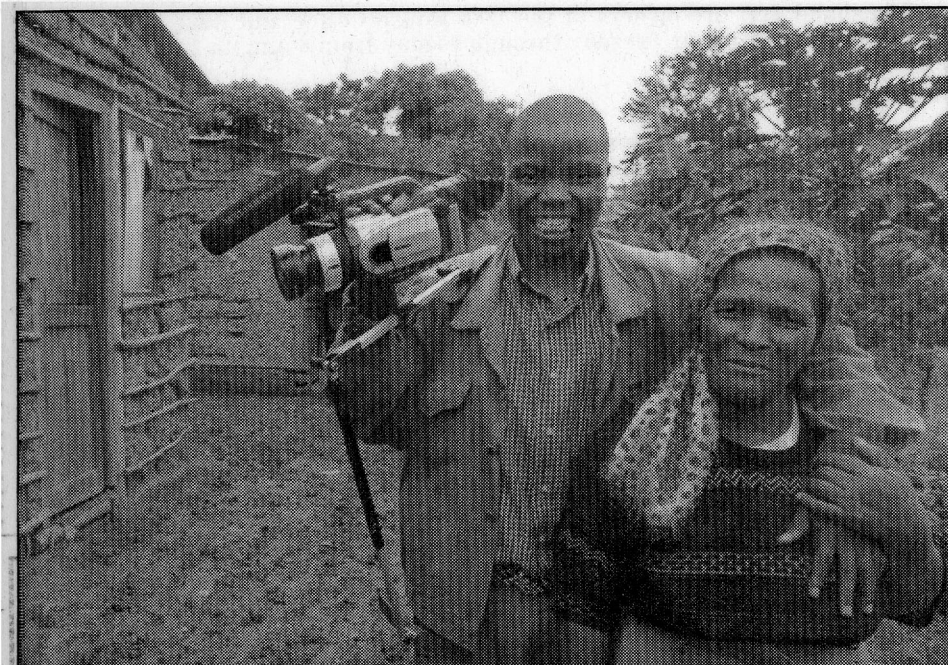
"I learned that I appreciate my rights [in this country]," says Terri. "I appreciate the freedom to vote, to stand up against injustice, and I learned how to fight my own battles, too, when it came to an unjust situation, even taking career risks to fight for what I think is right."

She also came away with a sense of what is really needed over there, and it's not refrigerators, televisions or VCRs. "They need education," says Terri, "and they need it badly. I talk with these people, especially the teenagers, and I ask, 'What do you want to be?' and they say, 'I want to be a lawyer.' 'I want to be a doctor.' And I say, 'Well, where do you go to school now?' and they're not going to school because public education is not free there. You have to pay tuition and school fees, you have to buy books and stationery and pencils and uniforms. They cannot go to school without them."

"These people crave education. They don't even have pencils. I went to this one little school (they called it a school) and there were six or seven children there, ages ten or eleven, and they were writing in the dirt with sticks. A family I know has eight children. Only one of them gets to go to school because they can't afford to send them all. So they send the smartest one."

Terri Cappucci is a big fan of education because, she says, of the great start she got at Greenfield Community College. "GCC really did give me my start. There's a lot of very patient instructors that really care about the students. I probably wouldn't have continued my education had it not been for people there who saw potential in me."

From GCC, Terri went on to get her B.A. degree in photojournalism at the University Without Walls program, and her MFA from the art program at UMass. Now, with her MFA completed, she hopes to bring education to the forefront of her life by becoming a teacher. For Terri Cappucci, teaching promises to be a way of "paying it forward" for the life-changing start she received at GCC.



Twenty-three-year-old Mxolisi Sikaos and his aunt, Baqondile Sikaos, in front of their home in the township of Myuchini, South Africa. Says Cappucci, "Mxolisi was learning to shoot video and spent three weeks working with me in January as an assistant while I completed my ten-year documentary project, 'Journeying to South Africa, 1993-2003.' In July, he will begin studying at Mangosutau to obtain his electrical engineering degree."