

The Robben Island Singers Film and Concert Project

Selected Media Coverage Report



2026 W. Giddings St.
Chicago, IL 60625
ph. 773-771-7697
fax 773-975-0699

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“Kenwood hosts freedom singers”



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Coverage of Kenwood HS Visit



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CBS 4 (KMOV-TV) St. Louis – February 6

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Blogs

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<http://district299.typepad.com/district299>



Mike Klonsky's Small Talk

[http://blog.360.yahoo.com/blog-6z6lhP08cqXp9kfshYQPv87gCfJyFg--
?cq=1&p=1075](http://blog.360.yahoo.com/blog-6z6lhP08cqXp9kfshYQPv87gCfJyFg--?cq=1&p=1075)

Small Talk

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http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-07020301851a602,1.6250913_story

South African singers' message, music inspire Chicago students

By Michelle S. Keller
Tribune staff reporter

February 2, 2007

The sounds of South African freedom songs filled the auditorium at Kenwood Academy High School Thursday as three former political prisoners shared their stories with students through music.

The performance by the Robben Island Singers—Muntu Nxumalo, Thembinkosi Sithole and Grant Shezi—is part of Chicago Public Schools' recognition of Black History Month. The schools' administrators, including CEO Arne Duncan, attended the event at the South Side magnet school.

The group, which is named for the prison where former South African President Nelson Mandela spent years for his opposition to apartheid, is touring schools throughout Illinois over the next two weeks.

Their visit is being filmed by Groundswell Educational Films and will be turned into a documentary.

After their performance, the singers told students about their fight for liberation in a country that has only recently discarded the veil of systematic segregation.

For many students at the predominantly African-American high school, the performance and the discussion were a unique way to link history and song through the eyes of people who experienced the hardships of apartheid.

"We learned about this stuff in history, but to meet people who actually went through it, it's kind of amazing," said senior Shadee Manuel, 17, who sang with the Robben Island Singers as part of the school's concert choir.

The singers emphasized the importance of being politically aware and fighting against inequality and injustice.

"This is a very critical age for high school kids," said Sithole, 50. "They are almost at the crossroads of their lives. My message simply is, know your world, know your place in it, and address the concerns in it. You have a responsibility as a young person to look at the situation and do something about it."

Growing up in a black-only township in South Africa, Sithole was struck early on by the stark inequality in his country.

"I didn't understand as a young kid why we were not allowed to swim where the whites were allowed to swim," Sithole said. "Why weren't we allowed to swim where it is beautiful and nice?"

He joined the anti-apartheid movement at age 15. Sithole was eventually arrested and spent a total of nine years imprisoned on Robben Island.

Kenwood Principal Elizabeth Kirby said it was important that the singers shared their history with the students so that the lessons and struggles of the past were not lost on future generations.

"As generations age, they lose their connection to past history," Kirby said. "Younger people may not know what it really means to sacrifice your life."

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Student leaders at Kenwood, 5015 S. Blackstone Ave., shared their own stories about challenges in their neighborhoods and how to encourage others to succeed academically.

"I'm not from a prestigious neighborhood," said junior Charles Merrick, 16, who lives in North Lawndale. "I'm from what you would maybe call a bad neighborhood. So these singers were a real inspiration. Their songs signify hope."

Merrick is part of a student-led mentoring group at Kenwood called the Brotherhood, where older high school boys tutor younger students.

"The purpose of your songs," he told the singers, "it embodies everything that our group is about."

Later, the singers discussed how they could take what they had learned at Kenwood home to South Africa. Nxumalo, 49, who is the chairman of his childhood township's education board, said he was inspired by how students had founded clubs to help each other succeed.

"We still have to face some immediate challenges, such as getting clean drinking water and electricity in rural areas," Nxumalo said. "But someday, some of these lessons will help us out."



Apartheid revisited ...

West students hear 3 S. Africans recall struggle they faced

BY RAMONA CURTIS
News-Democrat

BELLEVILLE - The Robben Island Singers' struggle for freedom began when the three men were the same age as the Belleville West High School students they met with on Monday.

"You are at an age when you will reach a turning point in your life," Grant Shezi told the auditorium of juniors and seniors. "The struggles that we chose at your age determined our destiny."

Shezi, Muntu Nxumalo and Thembinkosi Sithole are former African National Congress freedom fighters


who each spent more than a decade in the infamous Robben Island Prison, along with Nelson Mandela, as a result of their resistance to the racist South African apartheid system. They were freed in 1976 when apartheid ended.

Monday's stop at Belleville West was part of the singing group's two-week tour of American schools in an effort to entertain, inspire and educate. Before the group began their performance of folk and fight songs rendered in rich, three-part harmony, they sat down to talk to the students about their past endeavors and future hopes.



Zia Nizami/News-Democrat

From left, Robben Island Singers Thembinkosi Sithole, Grant Shezi and Muntu Nxumalo perform at Belleville West.

-  [Video: The Robben Island singers in concert](#)
- [Group stresses literacy to black youths](#)

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The three men, all from the segregated township of Durbin, talked about their impoverished childhood and the separate but unequal conditions between the privileged white minority population and the oppressed majority black population.

"We would leave home for school with no food in our belly," Shezi said. "The school is very far and there was no money to buy food. We would walk for miles to school barefoot... These are the things we would question. We asked, 'Why was this happening?'"

Nxumalo said his father, a Baptist minister, was treated differently than the other Baptist minister in the township, who was white.

"Every gift we were given had to go through the mission society," he said. "One time our church was given a car because my father would ride a bike. We never got it. When he asked about it, they said, 'What's wrong with a bike?'"

He told the students about times when the white police would raid their home in the middle of the night wanting to know how many people were sleeping in the home. Any "unauthorized" visitors would be removed.

"The conditions were so unbearable, there were not any options" Nxumalo said of his decision to join the ANC at the age of 15. "You only had two choices, submit or fight. So I chose to fight. I could not submit to this terrible situation."

The fighting led to imprisonment in Robben Island. It was there that they endured isolation, loneliness, beatings and hunger strikes. They were not allowed to read or given any paper on which to write.

"I learned the need to read is as powerful as the need to eat," Sithole said, reminding the students of the value of education.

But out of the despair came the singing.

"We were not musicians, but the music kept us going," Nxumalo said.

And the concert performed in both English and Zulu showed the students how that music kept them going. After the students gave the group a standing ovation, they said they too were motivated.

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"Getting people to come in and tell us about their struggles, it's really inspiring," said Victoria Thompson, a 16-year-old junior. "We just focus on American history and European history. We don't learn about Africa, the Middle East or even China. So many conflicts can be avoided if we start to learn about other cultures. It's crucial to being a global citizen."

The students in the enthralled audience wanted to know how difficult it was to leave their families and what their prison experience was like. Tyra Garrett, a 16-year-old junior, asked the men if the struggle was worth it.

"It was a positive thing that you know that when there was a need for change in the country, I stood up and that I have not disgraced my family by being a coward or looking the other way," said Sithole. "As soon as I made the decision to fight apartheid, I was free."

Contact reporter Ramona Curtis at rcurtis@bnd.com or call 239-2501.

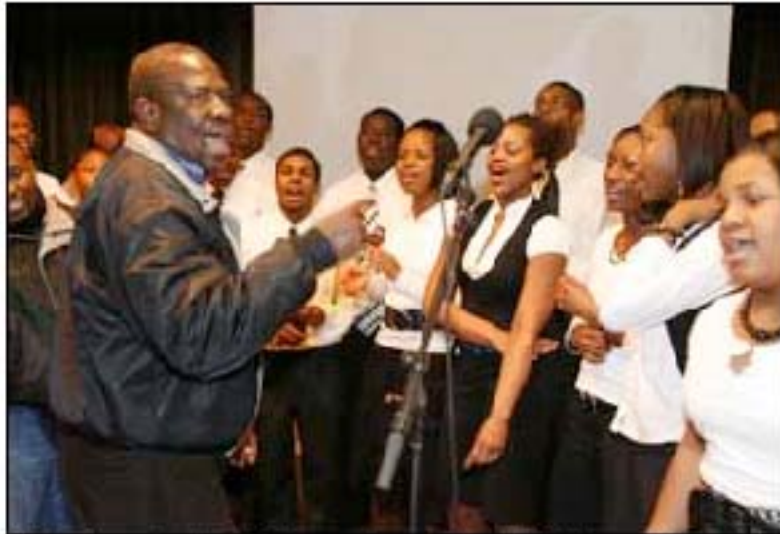
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

East St. Louis' visible poverty shocks South African singer

By Angie Leventis

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

02/07/2007



Muntu Nxumalo (right), 49, and Grant Shezi (left), 50, members of the Robben Island Singers perform and improvise sing-along with the East St. Louis Gospel Choir.
(Dawn Majors/P-D)

East St. Louis — As a child, Muntu Nxumalo was told his sin was his color.

The former South African political prisoner wasn't allowed at the nice beaches, the good stores and the beautiful neighborhoods because he was black. He was beaten and tortured for opposing apartheid as a teenager and spent 13 years at Robben Island Prison with civil rights leader Nelson Mandela.

Through struggle and conviction, he helped change the direction of his country. The system of segregation fell; his leader was

ultimately elected president and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

"You can determine your fate," he told a class of history students at East St. Louis High School on Tuesday. "Education without assisting your community is a useless application."

At an all-school assembly, Nxumalo, 49, and his fellow ex-political prisoners Theminkosi Sithole, 50, and Grant Shezi, 50, performed harmonies in English and Zulu chronicling their struggle. Then they went to classrooms and gave an oral history lesson through personal accounts of life under apartheid.

The former African National Congress freedom fighters, called the Robben Island Singers, are sharing their stories by performing songs and hosting class discussions at schools throughout Illinois in honor of Black History Month.

East St. Louis students gasped at graphic descriptions of torture, and Nxumalo gently reminded them that he was about their age when he entered the fight for equality. He encouraged them to strive for justice in their own community through political organization, volunteering and the arts.

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It was the trio's first time in the city of about 32,000 people. They were struck by similarities between East St. Louis and their homeland, Durban, South Africa.

East St. Louis is about 98 percent black and surrounded by more wealthy, predominantly white communities. Nxumalo remarked on the poor roads, run-down housing and abandoned neighborhoods.

"It surprised me that America has so much money, so many dollars," he said. "I was shocked. How should it be like this?"

Principal Terrence Curry said his students need this message on overcoming obstacles because they will likely encounter more than other teens. People will hear where they're from and judge them. They might have to work twice as hard in college or jobs to transcend stereotypes.

"There are going to be the same struggles in life," he said. "But if you persevere and work hard, you can overcome these obstacles. They are getting a message of hope."

Ebony Miller, 17, was moved.

"We should know about the struggles in Africa," she said. "We should know where we come from."

The Robben Island Singers, in turn, were touched by a reminder of home when they saw Nelson Mandela Elementary School on a city tour.

Sithole wants to photograph the building before leaving to show people back home how their leader has touched the international community, how their work has permanent honor oceans away.

"There is no joy above the joy of organizing with others," he said. "You need to go beyond yourself. Think of other people and how you can benefit the society around you."

HYDE PARK HERALD

Kenwood hosts freedom singers

By KALARI GIRTLEY
Contributor

The Chicago Public Schools kicked off Black History Month at Kenwood Academy High School last week hosting the Robben Island Singers, who were political prisoners under apartheid in South Africa.

Having been imprisoned with Nelson Mandela before he became South Africa's first black president, the Robben Island Singers shared their experiences of living through, protesting and surviving the brutal realities of their country's racist past.

As part of their first visit to Chicago schools, Kenwood Academy, 5015 S. Blackstone Ave. was their third stop on a five-school tour. Kenwood Principal Elizabeth Kirby said the event was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to meet in person people who struggled under government-sponsored segregation.

"We talk about Black History Month and celebrate what people have done. These are living (legends) and real examples of gentlemen who have given up their lives to the struggle to end apartheid," Kirby said.

The group sings about the movement to stop apartheid, which ended in 1994. Before each song the members would explain to the crowd the



Owen M. Lawson, III

The South African group, the Robben Island Singers, performed at Kenwood Academy last week.

importance of their fight.

Grant Shezi, a member of the group since its start in 1997, said he loved performing for the students because he was around their age when he decided to join the movement. "I find this very encouraging because I'm (educating the students)," Shezi, 50, said.

Shezi said he shares the same songs he sang while both in prison and in exile. "People could not start

their own businesses," Shezi said of apartheid. "Black Africans were oppressed in all areas of life and it was this that sparked the uprising."

One of the Kenwood students in the audience, Selenia Caraveo, said the performance inspired her. "I like that they are fighters, and they don't stop," Caraveo, 17, said.

The Robben Island Singers also performed at ShoreBank, 4659 S. Cottage Grove Ave.

CHICAGO DEFENDER

Motheland Music - If you're around 47th and Drexel Blvd. this evening and hear sounds from "the motherland," it's the Robben Island Singers of South Africa (a film and concert project) performing at ShoreBank's Kenwood branch. The free concert begins at 6:30 p.m.

Through stories, songs, film clips and Q&A, three ex-political prisoners from South Africa's struggle to end apartheid engage audiences in their incredible journeys and the process they are using to make a documentary film. From growing up in the townships, to armed struggle, torture and imprisonment on an island with Nelson Mandela, to the harmonies that fed their spirits in the cells and carries them forward, The Robben Island Singers open a window into the lives of former soldiers who now struggle to build a better future and just society in a new South Africa. Listen up!

District 299 Chicago Public Schools Blog

The inside scoop on Chicago schools -- all day, every day.

JANUARY 30, 2007

Mandela Mates Come To CPS High Schools

Three former prison mates of Nelson Mandela are visiting Chicago public high schools and telling stories and singing songs from the struggle to end apartheid as part of a new collaboration with Groundswell Educational Films.

Students and faculty prepare for the visit and connect the South African struggle to the critical issues of our time through a discussion guide and DVD with short segments of an upcoming feature documentary film called "The Robben Island Singers".



For more information about Groundswell Educational Film's Global Education Program and The Robben Island Singers Film & Concert Project, contact Jennifer Amdur Spitz at 773-975-1345 or go to to www.robbenislandsingers.com to see video of the Singers.

Small Talk

Freedom songs from Robben Island to Chicago [Update]



[M. Klonsky pic]

February 2nd

'Best assembly ever' --Kenwood Academy Kids

The **Robben Island Singers'** Chicago tour is starting to get some press. Check out the coverage in [today's Tribune](#) and this report on [WBBM radio](#). I watched the singers completely capture the kids at **Kenwood Academy** yesterday. When one of the former prisoners told about how their hunger for things to read led them to smuggle books and newspapers into the cells, everyone in the audience was focused. Later the auditorium erupted in song. This is what teaching/learning is supposed to look like.

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This was sent to me by **Diane Fager** at CPS, who was one of the event's key organizers:

*After the assemblies and media stuff, they did a Q&A with student leaders in a big circle. incredible.... then the Robben Island Singers were with the choir. the choir sang incredibly beautiful songs to them and vice versa. at the end, the RPS, per the request of the choir director, taught them the African National Anthem. They all practiced for about 15 minutes. Then the choir, with the RIS, stood up and gave the African National Anthem salute, (right hand in a fist and held up to our shoulder), and sang the anthem together. I truly had goose bumps all over me and tears in my eyes; it was so moving. This has turned out better than any of us could have imagined and it is because of the RIS; all of the hard work done by the schools and **Jeff/Jennifer [Spitz]**; and embracing the small schools' philosophy- (to the best of my unsophisticated knowledge of small schools/Dewey/Freirean philosophy: 'learn by doing; learn from the point of reference of where the student is at and what is relevant from his/her experience and then move from there; close inter-action and group learning between teachers, administrators and students; incorporate the arts and other innovative forms of expression to bring the experience home; and let everyone be the teachers and the students including the administrators, the outside people, the teachers and most importantly the students. The kids said that it was the "best assembly that Kenwood H.S. every had".*