

East St. Louis' visible poverty shocks South African singer

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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.

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."