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MUSIC

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Toronto Children's Chorus sings tribute to Nelson Mandela in South Africa

Chorus toured South Africa, trod in Mandela's footsteps and sang him a blessing outside hospital where the leader is ailing.

By: Trish Crawford
Music

The members of the Toronto Children's Chorus have been forever changed by a recent trip to South Africa.

The 23 choristers wept, sang blessings and learned to love a man they've never met during their two-week July trip to South Africa to participate in the Ihlombe! Festival and sing at public events.

While there, the children, ages 11 to 17, walked in the footsteps of anti-apartheid hero Nelson Mandela, including visiting his former prison cell and home.

Mandela was in critical but stable condition in Pretoria hospital last week.

For Olivia Dodge, 14, this was a history lesson unlike any other.

"I always knew he was great, but until I saw the changes and improvements in people's lives I didn't truly appreciate what a great leader he is," she says.

The Grade 10 student at Claude Watson School of the Arts program was overcome when she read get well wishes from Mandela's people on the walls outside the hospital.

"I was crying. The whole thing hit us like a slap in the face. This great man is in hospital. And we didn't really know about him until he was perishing."



MARIA MCDONALD PHOTO
Members of the Toronto Children's Chorus sing at the Amy Biehl Foundation in Soweto.

The singers signed a poster outside the former South African president's small house in Soweto with, "We love you."

Caroline Suri, managing director of the chorus, admits this journey was far more than just about singing with others from another culture.

"This was huge. We visited his (Mandela's) home, which is a museum; it is a tiny house."

There are a few artifacts left, including Sugar Ray Leonard's boxing gloves and a City of Toronto proclamation making him an honorary citizen, signed by (former mayor) Art Eggleton, she says.

The chorus performed a Maori piece from New Zealand, "Wairua Tapu," which is a blessing. They were given permission by both the hospital and Mandela's staff to perform outside the Heart Hospital, says Suri, adding they drew quite a crowd of hospital staff, visitors and nearby media awaiting news of the 95-year-old's condition.

Among their landmark events was a visit to the Amy Biehl Foundation, named after a young American killed in South Africa. In an act of forgiveness, the two men involved in her death were given jobs with the foundation.

These men now run a children's after-school program for shantytown kids, says Suri, adding this inspiring example of forgiveness touched the chorus members, who played with the children there.

Her daughter, Aisha, 13, in Grade 8, is a chorus member who also went on the trip. She was struck by the warmth of African people "who love to sing and dance. They are very spiritual people."

At Robben Island, now a park-like museum and "very beautiful," students stood in Mandela's cell. Their tour guide had also been a political prisoner there, says Aisha, and he showed them the quarry where prisoners crushed stone all day long.

The lessons learned in South African will never be forgotten, says Aisha.

"I am really glad our conductor picked South Africa. Everything I learned there, I took back with me."

Dodge agrees.

"I can't go back thinking the way I did before. There is so much that isn't fair. Maybe you can change things."