

The Washington Post

POST LOCAL

July 25, 2013

For Pr. George's choir, performances and lessons of a lifetime in South Africa

By **Petula Dvorak**,



They made international news outside the hospital caring for Nelson Mandela, brought the house down singing in magnificent churches, came face-to-face with zebras and penguins, flew in five different planes and stood high on Table Mountain, staring into the vast expanse of Africa's southernmost tip.

But for many members of Northwestern High School's choir, the most moving part of their 10-day tour of South Africa was the fourth day, when they visited Soweto and learned a different way to measure of wealth.

"That day in Soweto. In the shanty village," said Aaron Alexander, who is 17 and just graduated from the high school in Hyattsville. "When we were leaving, we gave the kids all our water. They were fighting over the water. And I don't even like drinking water and that made me realize how lucky we are. How much we have."

By American standards, many of the choir kids live on the edge poverty — but not by South African standards.

The Prince George's singers almost didn't make it to the prestigious Ihlombe Choral Festival, where they were the only American school choir invited to perform. As I wrote back in March, they'd been trying to raise the \$100,000 to take 50 kids and chaperones half-way across the world for two years. But holding bake sales, selling fruit and singing in churches had helped them scrape together just \$40,000.

So I asked Washington Post readers to help them raise the rest of the money they needed for the journey of a lifetime. And you came through, sending hundreds of checks that added up to more than \$70,000 in just a few weeks.

Not only did they raise enough money to take 47 kids on this amazing adventure, the boys were finally able to get full tuxedos and the girls each got a strand of faux pearls.

"They looked so professional," said choir director Leona Lowery, whose exacting and demanding style of teaching helped create the rich and wonderful sound that earns them perfect scores when they perform.

Until they left for South Africa earlier this month, most choir members had never been on an airplane before. Their first flight was 13 hours long.

Aaron took pictures of everything — the ticket counter, the departure area at Dulles, the jetway, the seats on the plane, the woeful airplane food.

“It was my first time flying,” he explained. At one point, he said, he had a panic attack and began crying. “It was so embarrassing, everyone was staring at me.”

The day after they arrived, their tour guide told them that they were staying just around the corner from the hospital where Mandela, the revered former South African president, was being treated for a lung infection. So they all walked over and were moved by the wall of well-wishes, the people praying outside, the media camped out.

They began singing. And their soaring voices made the news — CNN, British papers, South African TV. Here was a group of young, mostly black Americans who’d come to sing for a man many regard as a living saint.

Only later in the trip, when the students visited the shanty villages of Soweto, the museums in Mandela’s honor, when they learned the bloody history of apartheid and imagined his prison cell in Robben Island did they get the full weight of what it meant to sing for him.