

TEACHING Peace

New Hampshire educator Chris Mattise works to heal the wounds of apartheid

Lucie Bryar'76*

Technical Writer, Office of College Relations, Rivier College

(From: Rivier Today, Fall 2005)

Chris Mattise was working as a guidance counselor in a small New Hampshire town when she witnessed a bullying incident on the playground that would change her life. "I thought I knew how to handle most situations, but this particular instance was a tough one," says the Amherst resident who earned an M.Ed. from Rivier in 1994.

"She was sad and ran away," the children reported, "and now we can't find her!" A flicker of red behind a tree caught my eye—her small rubber boot. I found her sitting there, hugging her knees and whimpering.

Her body was fine— she had been missing for less than 15 minutes—but her spirit was shattered. We talked quietly about what had happened and, in a few minutes, she uncurled and we walked inside.

*I thought I had been dealing effectively with this bullying situation, but obviously traditional interventions (small group, individual counseling, classroom guidance, parent conferences) were having little or no effect. The bullies had stuck with their project relentlessly, using snide looks, vicious whispering and a systematic plan to totally isolate one child on the playground.***

The experience left Mattise shaken, but determined. "I realized that these children had no language or context to understand why their hurtful behaviors were so painful and damaging. It became my personal goal to give them that language." After months of research into the roots of school violence and bullying, Mattise developed a character education program, titled "Hurt-Free Schools" that was eventually adopted by her New Hampshire school district.

“Little did I realize at the time, that educators on a distant continent—a land of both great beauty and great pain—were involved in a similar, even more desperate search for this language,” Mattise wrote in a published article on www.tolerance.org.

Work takes her to South Africa to address problems of apartheid.

As a result of her “Hurt-Free Schools” program, Mattise was invited to a conference of the Association of Moral Educators in Scotland. There she met Colin Northmore from the Catholic Institute in South Africa, who invited her to come to his country to help address violence and bullying in the schools, largely a fallout from apartheid.

“What struck Colin about my work,” says Mattise “is that it is universal.” Mattise uses the colors of the rainbow and a traffic light to help young children understand they have a right to live in an emotionally, socially, and physically safe environment.

“True Blue” describes an ideal environment where everyone feels safe and is looking out for each other’s safety, Mattise explains. Other colors of “Hurt-Free Schools”—green, yellow, and red—signify varying levels of safety. The program is based on Mattise’s firm belief that, “We’re not going to stop violence by stopping aggression...we need to have the tools and the language to live in peace.”

It is a simple system with potentially far-reaching implications, Mattise discovered when she first took the program to schools in Johannesburg five years ago.

There, in a country torn apart by nearly 50 years of segregation and oppression, whites and blacks are trying to follow the inspiration and leadership of Nelson Mandela, who envisioned a “Rainbow Nation.”

“We’re not going to stop violence by stopping aggression...we need to have the tools and the language to live in peace,” says Chris Mattise, explaining her Hurt-Free Schools program.

“The students I’ve worked with are responsive to my message,” says Mattise, who has spent the last five summers presenting “Hurt-Free Schools” in South Africa.

“The beauty is that the very young children are not yet scarred by the threat of violence. They’re receptive to learning how to live together.”

But the news isn’t all good.

“Blacks are impatient and embittered from years of oppression. White people live in fear for their safety,” says Mattise, who fears for her own safety while in South Africa and admits to facing an increasing climate of violence and distrust in the country with each passing year. She is quick to point out that bullying and violence in the schools cuts across racial lines.

“There’s a definite hierarchy of power,” says Mattise, who explains, “Kids try to humiliate each other with phrases like, “Your parents don’t drive a BMW”— a comment directed to the more privileged students—or “Your father has AIDS,” a taunt that cuts across class lines.

Clearly her goal to help improve school climate in South Africa is a monumental task, but Mattise persists in her efforts, teaching an estimated 5,000 schoolchildren each summer, and presenting daily sessions to 200 to 300 parents as well.

Mattise's message of non-violence has drawn the attention of government officials in South Africa, including the Commissioner of Human Rights. In a private meeting, Mattise "encouraged him to examine peer abuse in the schools."

She likens the children in South Africa to "canaries in the coal mines." In the past, she explains, miners would take a canary into the coal mines in order to monitor air quality. "When the canary stopped singing, the miners knew they needed to run for their lives." Like the canaries in the coal mine, Mattise says, the children of South Africa are "gasping for air. They can't breathe."



Racial issues and peace work become focus for the future.

Mattise is hopeful that her message and that of others will be heard before the next generation reaches adulthood. She remains passionate about her work in South Africa—"If my family could be safe there, I would move there in a minute," she says, but since that first incident on a New Hampshire playground ten years ago, she has taken her "Hurt-Free Schools" program to many corners of the United States as well.

She has worked with schoolchildren, teachers, and guidance counselors, including on Navajo reservations, and has addressed the National Association for Elementary School Principals and the Child Welfare League of America.

Now a full-time doctoral student in counselor education at Penn State, Mattise is increasingly turning her attention to racial tension as it affects bullying and violence. She is involved with Sankofka, a black student-led group on campus and she serves on three "climate" committees at the University. "We have a changing ethnicity in this country and we need to be proactive about addressing racial tensions."

“I’ve been thinking back to my guidance classes at Rivier and ‘connecting the dots,’” says Mattise, who hopes to continue her work as an international peace educator. “For now, I believe my work should be with teachers and guidance counselors who hold the future of tomorrow’s children in their hands.” Ten years later, she is still haunted by the memory of the little girl curled up in a ball on a New Hampshire playground. “It shouldn’t hurt to go to school,” she says simply.

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in newswriting, marketing, and public relations, including nearly 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position, she produces the faculty/staff newsletter, *Campus Forum*; Bryar also writes marketing materials for admissions, copy for the college website, and feature and news articles for the magazine, *Rivier Today*.

** First-person account originally published on www.tolerance.org/teach/