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It's all a question of **CLASS**

Black students have a burning desire to succeed
but they face an uphill struggle, writes Fiona Forde

Mongamo reckons matric will be the making of him. "This year is the decider," the aspiring graduate defiantly tells the camera. "Where you are going to be in the next 10 years, it all depends on this year."

Strong words that speak volumes in American filmmaker Molly Blank's soon-to-be released documentary about life in Grade 12 for a bunch of black South Africans. Set in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town, the hour-long film traces the lives of four pupils in the latter half of 2005 as they prepare for the end-of-school exam.

It captures their efforts to get on in life. And it records some bleak facts on "judgment day" when the results are released.

"It's a heartbreaking story," says education expert Jonathan Jansen,

"and nobody who watches this film will ever again interpret the matric results with the unrestrained exuberance to which we are treated every year."

Blank, a keen student of the civil rights movement in the United States, touched down in the Mother City a decade after apartheid ended. What she encountered was an education system stretched at the seams, a wide variety of pupils on its books and a range of schools that differed greatly in the quality of education they were able to offer.

The film is set in the Oscar Mpetha High School in Nyanga against the backdrop of an underprivileged community where many pupils go to school on empty stomachs and where home for many more is a shack with no running water or electricity. School is a big part of their lives. But for some of them, supporting the family is even bigger.

The school itself is clearly showing signs of age and lack of resources: broken windows in need of repair; too few desks; too many pupils; not enough chairs. And not always a teacher on hand to give the learners what they're looking for.

"There's a moment in the film when a child is talking and it was so cold you see her breath. That was a remarkable moment for me," says Blank.

But it hammered home the kind of challenges the learners and teachers have to overcome - "the different factors in their lives that impact their ability to succeed academically" - not only in Nyanga but in countless other poor communities across the country.

It surprised Blank. And at times it overwhelmed her. But she says she was never expecting perfection anyway.

"Apartheid had only ended a decade before I arrived. I didn't expect the problem to be fixed. Ten years isn't a long time," she says.

"Remember it's more than 50 years since the Brown versus the Board of Education case in the United States." This was the landmark US Supreme Court ruling that put an end to segregated schooling.

“Fifty years after desegregating our public schools we are still faced with the challenge of giving all our kids a quality education.”

Before turning her hand to filmmaking, Blank was an elementary teacher in an underprivileged school in inner-city Washington which also suffered from the effects of poor resources.

“Most of my students faced similar challenges to those who live in the townships - they faced poverty and crime, often came to school hungry and many were behind in school. But the truth is, when I compare the facilities, resources, teaching, students’ economic circumstances and living conditions, these students in South Africa face much greater challenges.”

What sets the South African pupils apart from their US counterparts “is their resilience, continued optimism, their sense of hope, opportunity and possibility. They have dreams and they really believe in their dreams.”

Blank logged those dreams from August 2005 through to the day the results were released that December. She noted the ambitions of these learners to study more, to enrol at one of Cape Town’s universities and one day become professionally qualified.

She listened to them as they talked of becoming “someone” in life and of why they believed they deserved a bite at the future. And what she has brought to the silver screen now is this latest struggle of South Africa’s youth.

Blank is reluctant to tell us who got what at the end of the day. “I don’t want to spoil the drama of the film,” she says. But if you consider the results of that year, it’s not beyond any of us to add two and two and make four.

Of the 533,400 pupils who enrolled to sit the 2005 exam, only 508,360 went on to write it. And of the 347,180 who passed, a mere 86,530 received endorsements. Not surprisingly, none



of the graduates of Oscar Mpetha High School are university undergraduates today.

“The results read more or less like the Grade 12 results of every year since democracy came to South Africa,” says Jansen.

“The majority of students who sit for the examination pass; a small percentage achieve endorsement; very few write and even fewer pass mathematics and physical science on the higher grade; rural provinces with the largest enrolments fare worse than the large urban provinces; and the former white schools perform much better, on average, than the large majority of black schools.”

In short: “Twelve years of annual matriculation results confirm that South Africa has settled for a pattern of two distinct school systems.”

And let’s not fool ourselves or the young hopeful pupil, appeals Jansen. “It’s best for a student who passes matric to understand that this paper means one thing only: he or she completed high school. That is why passing well is the only thing that matters, not just passing.”

And if merely passing provides narrow opportunities in this life, imagine the outcome of failure.

Blank takes Jansen’s argument one step further when she says: “During apartheid, black students received a

substandard education. The fact that students at Oscar Mpetha High School still learn with 50 to 60 students in some classrooms and have a library with many empty shelves is a legacy of that injustice. The bottom line is that there are still great disparities in South Africa’s education system. And while I know progress has been made, I think the legacy of apartheid will linger in schools for years to come.”

So why beam their miserable lives across the world on the big screens? If the injustice is so blatant, what good will an hour-long documentary do to change their lives?

“If this film can put a name and a face to these pressing issues facing the children of South Africa, then I’ve done my job,” says Blank, who only ever wanted to bring the statistics to life. “These are kids whose voices are never really heard. And if their passion and commitment can mobilise some people to take some action, then I think I’ve done them justice.”

One of the learners who feature in the film put it like this: “It’s an opportunity for us to get noticed as black students who are studying in bad conditions. It represents all the students who don’t have much in their schools but strive to get the best in life.”

The sad fact is that few, if any of them at all, will read their story in these pages. They don’t belong to the South Africans classes who can afford the price of a Saturday newspaper.