



Paul Lee
Senior
Weaverville, N.C.

Paul Lee

"The people-centred society we seek to build throughout our Continent requires, among other things, that we should aim to ensure that every single African, regardless of age, gender, class, race, ethnicity or belief should live in conditions of freedom, dignity and absence of fear."

—THABO MBEKI,
PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

My Burch Fellowship enabled me to observe the development of democracy in Southern Africa amidst a period of political turbulence. As it emerged from the oppression

Continued ▶



Political Conflict and Democratic Change in 21st Century Southern Africa



of colonialism and Apartheid, Southern Africa was charged with economic optimism and diplomatic potential. Yet as years of financial degeneration went by and corruption in political structures became apparent, the region turned to its most basic democratic institutions for respite—its consortium of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

By working first-hand with various civil rights NGOs across the region, I was able to understand the importance of taking the politics back to the people, particularly in an area so tenuously holding on to its notion of an open society. In Cape Town, South Africa, I interned with the Parliamentary Monitoring Group. Each morning I would sit in on sessions of the South African

Parliament and hear the discussion of issues ranging from abortion laws to low-cost housing options to

the administration of South African television stations. Later each day, I would type up the minutes of the discussion and post them on an Internet site for journalists, other NGOs and the general public to use. For a society that boasts the transparency of its government, this was one method of ensuring that the people knew what was going behind chamber doors.

After a month, I moved on to Windhoek, Namibia where I worked with the Namibian Society for Human Rights, a government watchdog group that reported violations of human rights across the country. I assisted in the commemoration of the official United Nations Day of Remembrance for Victims of Torture. I interviewed an Owambo woman who claimed the National Army had abducted her husband for his political views. I visited a town on the Kavango River left desolate by violence that had spilled over from the Civil War

in Angola. I observed a town meeting of white farmers who had captured San Bushmen farmhands whom they were accusing of stealing their cattle. These encounters allowed me to witness the difficult crusade of preserving even the most basic human entitlements—the right to life and the right to liberty.

On the final leg of my journey, I worked for MWENGO, an organization based in Harare, Zimbabwe that assisted other NGOs across Eastern and Southern Africa in networking, securing funds, developing strategies and utilizing resources. I assisted developing a handbook for NGOs dealing with the issue of land occupation in Southern Africa. I also helped organize a conference discussing the ideology of NGOs in the political sphere. From this broad perspective, I could see the cooperation and communication between a diverse body of civil society agents, all working toward the common

goal of engaging the public to become involved in and informed of the matters of governance within their respective nations.

While my internship experiences were quite captivating and enriching, what really opened my eyes to the circumstance of the African people was spending my free time with my African co-workers and other locals I met along the way. I remember vividly the coldness of the dirt floor on which I slept as I spent the weekend in Khayelitsha, a high-density, low-income township on the outskirts of Cape Town. I recall the tired eyes of Namibian soldiers returning from battle in the Democratic Republic of Congo as president Sam Nujoma praised their bravery at a political rally. I protested alongside the Zimbabwean people as food prices nearly doubled every week and supermarket shelves became more and more bare. It was so clear to me the connection between the quality of people's lives and the expression of their voices in the affairs of their own governments. I hope to return one day to this region of promise in order to further the quest for a truly "people-centred society."