

SAEP-UCT MOUNTAIN & SKI CLUB HIKING AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

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SAEP and the **UCT Mountain and Ski Club (UCT MSC)** have launched a partnership designed to provide a group of 15 underprivileged Grade 9 and 10 learners with an outdoor-based experiential learning programme designed to enable them to appreciate the natural environment of the Cape Peninsula, develop leadership skills, and learn to function as a team. This is being done through a series of ten entry-level hikes during the second and third school terms in 2006.

Unlike the hikes led by the Mountain Club of South Africa (MSCA), which introduces a different group of learners each month to hiking and climbing, the UCT MSC programme focuses on a core group of fifteen in order to build relationships in the group while building skills, creating opportunities for kids to enjoy vigorous physical exercise in the Table Mountain National Park, and developing environmental awareness and the need for environmental conservation.

It's a way of opening up the out-of-doors to members of a community that rarely has this opportunity. Coming from different schools, different sections of the township, and most importantly different homes, each individual brings his own uniqueness to the group and contributes something different to the group dynamics."

At the **first meeting**, an introduction and training session held at Zisukhanyo High, the learners hardly spoke to one another, only answering to the leaders and doing what they were being asked to do. Their **first outing** saw them hiking from Constantia Neck, for the most part on a jeep track, to the most beautiful gardens of all within the Western Cape area, Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden. One could sense and feel the personal relationships developing and the learners becoming interdependent. They grouped themselves according to their respective schools and relied on safe patterned behaviours, not wanting to be seen different and having a desire for acceptance by the group. They often wanted to keep things safe and simple, avoiding anything that would lead to any kind of argument or differences."

The **second hike** began at Kalk Bay. It more challenging than the first one; the learners had to climb the mountain following small trails that required them to sometimes stretch and climb big rocks. This hike also involved their first experience in exploring a cave, which required them to scramble and crawl in some very tight places. A competition developed among the group members, each trying to show others who was the best and bravest of them all. One could feel the conflict escalating silently among the group members. Although nothing specific ever surfaced, one could definitely see that group

issues do exist that would have to be addressed on future hikes. At the same time, there was a sense of individuals bending and molding their feelings, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs as to suit the group. Because of "fear of exposure" or "fear of failure," there was an increased desire to show commitment.

The **third hike** turned out not to be a hike after all, since rainy weather played its part. Instead, we took the participants to the University of Cape Town's Sports Department. They got a chance to do some wall climbing, and we introduced a lot of team game and activities to build their trust to one another and help them to talk through their differences. This saw them acknowledging everybody's presence and the part each plays within the group. They shared feelings and ideas, asked for and gave each other feedback, and explored actions related to the tasks given. They worked exceptionally well together.

Following the development of this group has been of great help to SAEP in understanding the mindset and the natural behaviors of teenagers coming from disadvantaged areas who a lot of difficult situations ranging from high crime rate, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy, a high risk of HIV/AIDS infection and, in the long run, the prospect of unemployment and continuing poverty. It is SAEP's objective to work with this core group of young people, engaging them in all sorts of personal development and community development activities, as they are the best and most valuable asset to the community and the key to the development of their heritage.

A new component to build group skills has also been introduced. It is called "TOUCHSTONES." It takes the form of a discussion group led and facilitated by an intern from St. John's College in the US, Blair Thompson, a Bachelor of Arts student majoring in Philosophy. The Touchstones discussion groups help the participants develop group discussion skills as well as critical thinking. It is here that we wish to strengthen and create an environment for these young kids to be able talk about and explore ways in which they can be part of and play a role in the development of their communities.

A next step is to work closely with this group by enabling them to introduce SAEP Clubs in their schools. They would then be the representatives of SAEP in their respective schools, giving SAEP more insight into the needs of students and acting as a source of information about SAEP to the other learners.

- The journey continues --