



Teresa Harris

Educator, advocate, Fulbright awardee headed to South Africa

BY CHRIS EDWARDS

Students and professors in JMU early childhood, elementary education and reading programs will soon join a three-way partnership working and learning with colleagues at two South African schools. College of Education professor Teresa Harris will prepare the way, thanks to a Fulbright award that will fund her January to June 2010 visit to the University of Pretoria; Child Academy, a private school in Johannesburg's Tamesa township; and Dzindi Primary, a rural public school in the Limpopo Province.

Harris' immersion in African education began in 2006 when she served as curriculum specialist for local teachers visiting Kenya on a five-week intercultural travel seminar supported by a Fulbright-Hays/U.S. Department of Education grant. She also made a brief visit to South Africa on assignment for her church, working with the Child Academy faculty to bring JMU students the following year.

That year, Harris expanded her network of colleagues from those in UNISA to the University of Pretoria ECD acting department head. The two looked for ways to work more closely. By the time Harris returned in 2009 with eight more JMU elementary education students, she and the department head outlined an action plan to be implemented through the Fulbright program.

During her 2010 Fulbright semester, Harris will work with the ECD faculty at UP to design a new fourth-year bachelor's honors degree and a new M.Ed. program. She will also work closely with professors in their research projects. Harris says she will also provide professional development for teachers at Child Academy and Dzindi Primary.

While trips to Africa with Harris are intensive, JMU students gain valuable teaching experience, have opportunities to study child development, and learn about the culture, geography and political structure. Harris prepares students for the economic diversity that they will see. Townships and rural areas often lack

access to indoor plumbing or paved roads. During homestays, students learned to heat water on the stove for baths and to walk to school. However, students quickly learn that their South African families are incredibly hospitable. "Africans are open, friendly and gracious, and educators face similar issues in Africa and America," according to Harris.

When comparing the U.S. and South African educational systems, Harris notes that both are working hard to address the inequities of access to high quality learning opportunities for all children. "The focus for all of us is on young children, however there is a difference in the way the two societies perceive teaching. In South Africa teaching is a fairly low-paying job, with little prestige."

Harris edits *The Constructivist*, an educational e-journal, which she expects to continue while in Africa. "Constructivism," she explains, is an umbrella term for "learning theories that focus on the ways learners construct meaning from their experiences and interactions." As an editor she will work with faculty members and teachers to broaden the conversations about what it means to learn and teach in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Harris expects her Fulbright semester will include working directly with local children as well as university students. The new partnership may feature future seminars at JMU and UP, led by instructors from each university, as well as interactive online studies.

Harris passionately believes in educators becoming advocates. "For us, children and families are the most important part of the system. If we care for them well, we have a just and thriving society of human beings," she says.

Both here and in South Africa, Harris sees the schools' and teachers' roles as serving children and their families: "Making sure they have a voice and can access resources to take a place in society," she explains. Those resources she notes include good nutrition, health care and employment opportunities.

When challenges seem overwhelming, Harris advises her students to remember, "Being an advocate is a part that I can play." ❧

* More at www.jmu.edu/news/madison scholar/teresaHarris.shtml

Fulbright Scholar Teresa Harris firmly believes in educators serving as advocates for students and families.