

feature

Dal alumnus to monitor South African election

by Mark Farmer

On April 8 Dalhousie alumnus Karen Hudson is going to help monitor what may turn out to be a triumph of democracy or a simple bloodbath: the South African election.

Hudson, 28, graduated from Dal with a degree in International Development Studies in 1988 and a Bachelor of Education in 1991. She currently lives in Cherrybrook, and teaches full-time at Prince Arthur Junior High School while working part-time on her Master's of Environmental Studies. She's also a volunteer with OXFAM, who recruited her to monitor the elections. As part of a 30-member team from Canada, she'll work as an observer, reporting voting irregularities to the South African monitors, and making sure voters have proper ID. But Hudson says she isn't overwhelmed by the responsibility.

"Some days I feel a little bit nervous, and other days I feel like I'm floating on air. Some days when people talk to me about it, that's when I start to wonder if this is the right choice. Am I putting my life in jeopardy?"

External Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency are footing the bill for the 30 Canadians going. Hudson and Randy Mapp, the only Mar-

itimers chosen, will be based in KwaZulu, Natal Province, the principal homeland for Zulus, the largest tribe in South Africa. It was members of the predominantly Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party that clashed with Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) on March 28 in Johannesburg, killing 34 people and wounding over 200. It was the worst violence South Africa has seen in two years, but Hudson tries not to dwell on the violence that may or may not well up.

"People always say to me, 'Karen do you think about the violence?,' but what I'm thinking is 'Wow, this is going to be such a powerful and wonderful experience just to be chosen.' It'll be the experience of a lifetime."

"I hope we won't see any violence, but I guess it's part of life in South Africa. It's just like violence here or in the United States — it doesn't happen all over the place — it happens in pockets. I just know that if all of us play our part as observers, then we shouldn't have any problems in regards to our safety."

In order to ensure that safety, the government is supplying the observers with T-shirts, badges, baseball caps and jackets to clearly identify them. They also get beepers to connect them to the OXFAM head office in Durban and a car to get them out of trouble spots if things get too violent.

Hudson sounds confident and optimistic about the job, and that comes through when she explains what she expects of the South Africans she'll encounter.

"I try to believe that there's hope, hope that even though those people

[in the March 28 massacre] are capable of killing, they're also capable of loving and sharing and giving," she explains.

Hudson will be flying to Ottawa April 3 for a briefing with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the national head of OXFAM. There she'll get some background on Canada's role and the role of women in the election, South African culture, the possibility of violence, her role as an observer, and just about anything else that could happen to them in their line of work. "One of the hardest parts is going to be controlling reactions based on things you may see which you disagree with. Here we have the right to speak freely, and they probably do too in South Africa, but there the right to speak sometimes can cost you your life. So it's important to tone down what you say, not overreact, and make sure you use objectivity and reason."

This is the first time Hudson has done anything like monitor an election in a foreign country, but she definitely has experience abroad. She's worked in poverty-stricken areas in Thailand, for Canadian Crossroads International in a girls' school and women's group in Kenya, and

she's travelled to Zimbabwe and through East Africa, so her friends and family know she can survive on her own.

"They're all pleased and very

supportive, and most of them say to me 'we're going to be praying that they take you there safely and bring you back safely.' I've had a lot of prayers and a lot of good wished for a safe return and a wonderful experience from family, teachers and friends." Hudson says the media may have a lot to do with the negative image South Africa has in people's minds. She says she wants to watch the South African media, to see how they report the election and how they interpret it.

"You listen to the news, you watch the news, and everybody knows about the Zulus, everybody knows about the ANC, they know about other parties, but what about the women's party? You don't really hear about it. What is the other side we never hear about? People are going to want to hear what happened there. Is it all that people said it was? Is it everything that gets exaggerated on TV based on the violence?"

As a black and also as a young woman Hudson brings her own perspective and concerns to the job. She knows that as a black, whites will look on her a certain way, and as a woman she'll also be expected to act in a certain way, even more so than in Canada. Those facts don't appear to change her attitude. She seems confident but realistic about the possibilities the election opens up.

"Women have played an important role in the development of South Africa, but even if you look at Canada or other countries, women have been silenced, and they haven't been allowed to speak out. Well here women will have to take their rights and decide that 'OK, I relied on my spouse

to make the decision before, but now I have to make the decision on who I think is going to best represent my interests in government.' If you're brought up in this way based on this culture, then you're always dependent on men to make the decisions for you."

"I was also told that because of the complexion of my skin I wouldn't be considered black, I would be considered coloured, which means one of your parents must be white. Yes, I could be mistaken for a South African, but it'll be same with whites too. They could be mistaken for Afrikaners. Colour definitely will play a role in what we can and can't do."

And when she finally gets back, Hudson says she wants to help clear up some of the ignorance surrounding South Africa. People are already booking her for functions, receptions and classes to address.

"You see, not just within South Africa, but in any country, whether it be here or the United States, Latin America or what have you, when people want to change, there's a battle based on political rights or economics. Now in South Africa it's going to be based on human rights. This is democracy in the making."



Election monitor Karen Hudson.

PHOTO: MARK FARMER

GOING TO EUROPE THIS SUMMER?

GET THE BASIC NECESSITIES AT TRAVEL CUTS BY APRIL 15TH



AND WE'LL THROW IN A COUPLE OF FRILLS

The best deals to Europe this summer are available exclusively from Travel CUTS.

Student Class™ air fares are your ticket to maximum savings and flexibility.

Bon Voyage™ travel insurance — designed specifically for students — is comprehensive yet inexpensive. Eurailpass, flexipass, the new Europass, point-to-point and country passes — we have them all, our agents will help you choose, then issue them on the spot!

Book all three,* flight, insurance and rail pass by April 15th and we'll throw in a free LET'S GO EUROPE plus a night at The Pink Palace in Corfu, Greece.



Dalhousie University, Student Union Building Tel: 494-2054



Get a free copy of the budget traveller's "Bible", a guide to eating, sleeping and getting around Europe.



Get a free night including breakfast and dinner at the world's largest youth resort



*Certain restrictions may apply, offer available while supplies last and may be discontinued at any time. Conditions vary in British Columbia.