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PROJECT PROFILE:
WEMBLEY TO SOWETO

Mother and son in Alex Township. © John Cole

AOP member John Cole writes about the inspirational project he describes as “teaching young South Africans to feed their families with their cameras”

Wembley to Soweto began as a casual conversation in a Brighton café. It has since grown into an international education project that has taught eight disadvantaged teenagers from Johannesburg townships the fundamentals of photography so that they can begin to earn money with their cameras.

The project really started long before that, in 1988, when over 80,000 people attended a concert at Wembley Stadium, London to celebrate the seventieth birthday of Nelson Mandela. A global





Wembley Stadium
1988. © John Cole

audience of 600 million viewers tuned in as the world sent many happy returns to Prisoner 46664, and joined with him in spirit to demand an end to apartheid in South Africa.

I was at that concert twenty-two years ago and photographed the huge throng of people who had

come to honour Mr. Mandela. Last December I got a call from David Westhead, an actor and producer who I had never met before, asking me for a copy of the 1988 concert image to give to his friend and fellow film producer Kweku Mandela.

When we met, David explained

how he'd been working in South Africa for the last eight years training young people from the townships the film making process. "I'm fed up with Hollywood and Pinewood importing whole film crews to South Africa and I wanted to create real work for South Africa's burgeoning film industry," he

said. "In South Africa, it's about the meal, not the cutlery." Very soon I felt like I was talking with a friend I had known for years, and when I told David about my work as a photographer and teacher, we sparked ideas off each other and *Wembley to Soweto* was born.

What has been so very special about this project is the huge international support we've had from the very beginning. We literally didn't have a penny to start with, but we (mostly David – what an amazing fund raiser!) managed to raise enough cash through private donations to pay for our airfares, accommodation and transport in Jo'burg for a week's recce plus the four-week project. So many people have been so magnanimous along the way that I sometimes have had to pinch myself that it was really happening.

Starting from absolute scratch, we found our eight students – four girls and four boys – from Jo'burg's Umuzi Photo Club; we were given free use of a room at City Varsity College – Joburg's leading Arts and Media college – plus the use of eight shiny new iMacs; South Africa's finest creatives and media professionals – such as film maker Kweku

Mandela, photographer Peter Magubane, writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and actor Dorothy Ann Gould, to name but a few – all gave of their time freely and generously to help the project along; and Nikon UK generously donated six Nikon COOLPIX P100 cameras.

The students loved using these cameras, especially as most of them had only used throw-away film cameras or very basic digital snapshot cameras. It didn't take them long to figure out how to use them and soon they were shooting stills as well as short films. During the course, I let the students have a go with my D300 and old D70 Nikons. After a few weeks into the course, 16-year-old Siyabonga (whose name means *thank you*) looked at me earnestly and said, "John, I think I am now ready for the D70." At the end of the course, I left my trusty old D70 and zoom lens for the students to continue sharing and using.

Before arriving in Jo'burg, I wrote up a comprehensive four-week course plan. This didn't last long, as we quickly chopped and changed the project as different photographic opportunities became available. I knew I *had* to do some classroom lectures on



Students taking photos on the streets of Soweto just before the Super 14 South Africa rugby final match © John Cole.



Tshepang Masemola taking photos in Soweto before the SA/Mexico match. © John Cole



Mexico scores a goal! You could feel the despair, the disappointment, the sadness when Mexico equalised. The fact that it was a draw did little to cheer up the fans. © Vuyokazi Manini



David and I with all the students outside City Varsity School of Media and Creative Arts, Johannesburg

camera technique and the Mac, but it was a lot more fun being out in the field and learning as we were doing.

It's no exaggeration to say that we covered some amazing assignments: White Afrikaner rugby fans in the heart of Soweto for the final of SA Rugby League, merrily drinking and carousing with local residents; a raucous pre-World Cup celebration of 'Bafana Bafana' at a Soweto Baptist church service; a Saturday afternoon exploration of Jo'burg's vibrant and edgy street markets; a Soweto street party before South Africa's opening match that was like an English street party, but with *vuvuzelas* and a lot more drinking; and an afternoon at the Soweto Fan Park to watch on a mammoth outdoor screen South Africa's brilliant – but ultimately heartbreaking – tie with Mexico. The highlight for the students was the World Cup Kick-Off Concert. Through sheer tenacity, genius and *chutzpah*, David managed to get press passes so that the students could photograph an international pop concert being broadcast around the world. What thrilled me more than photographing Shakira and Alicia Keys and a lot of other acts I'd never heard of was the thrill of seeing

these kids, who had had so few opportunities in life, given the chance to be part of this historic event.

During a break in the concert, 17-year-old 'Captain' Kaugelo Mabjwe (who is very shy, very serious and very talented) asked me about my work as a freelance photographer. When I explained what I did and how I worked, he looked at me gravely and said, "John, I want to be like you." I had to turn away for fear that he'd see the tears in my eyes.

For me, the most powerful and moving day was our visit to Captain's hometown of Diepsloot, some 30 miles north of Jo'burg. Though I knew that most of the kids came from very poor backgrounds, I didn't fully appreciate where they had come from until our day in this township where indoor plumbing is a luxury. It was, in a sense, the ultimate photographic workshop, with pictures everywhere I turned. In a strange way it was exotic and even tragic, but to them it was simply ordinary, just part of their everyday life. It made me appreciate how very far these young people had come – physically as well as mentally – to participate in the course.



Fans cheering on SA at the Fan Park. © John Cole

Was the course a success? I'd like to think so, and I was reassured by what 17-year-old Thapelo said in Diepsloot as he was being interviewed by Aljazeera television. "I like to take pictures that show the surroundings of the society, the details of people's lives. I don't like snapshots, I hate those kind of photos." So do I, Thapelo, so do I!

The four-week *Wembley to Soweto* course is really only the beginning. With the help of friends in the UK, America and back in South Africa, we will continue working with the kids online to nurture their photographic skills. David and I are confident that as long as we can get funding, there will be many more similar projects: for example in the *favelas* of Rio as well as in the East End of London for the

upcoming Olympics. *Wembley to Soweto* started from a dream over a cup of coffee and has turned into something that we hope will go some small way towards helping these kids make a living with their cameras. The truth is they're not kids but young adults, but for David and me, they'll always be our 'kids'. Sixteen-year-old Tshepang perhaps summed it up most

poetically when she said, "I really wish and hope that *Wembley to Soweto* can be a big tree that grows a lot of branches to let the world know about photography and how what we experience in our everyday life can be interpreted through pictures."

I feel hugely privileged to have worked with these very talented young people and without a doubt this has been one of the most rewarding, satisfying and

absolutely fun projects that I have ever worked on.
© John Cole
www.johncole.co.uk

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City Varsity students get used to their new Nikons by practicing head shots of David.



© Siyabonga Sepotpkete



© 'Captain' Kaugelo Mabjwe

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