

## **THE CONSTITUTION AND YOUTH CITIZENSHIP**

*By Rebecca Sibanda: Legal Assistant; Centre for Constitutional Rights*

On the morning of Wednesday 20 July 2016, the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CFCR) and the School of Public Leadership (SPL) at Stellenbosch University (SU), supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), hosted a breakfast discussion as part of their running Constitutional dialogue series. The aim of these discussions is to create a platform for conversation and debate about the Constitution and good public leadership. This discussion was youth-oriented and was attended by high school learners from Bellville High School, Bernadino Heights High School, De Kuilen High School, Eerste Rivier Secondary School, the German International School, Isilimela High School, Kasselsvlei Comprehensive High School, Parow High School, Sarepta Secondary School, The Settlers High School, as well as the Cape Town Junior City Council. The breakfast was held in the Bellville High School Hall, which was graciously made available by the school.

The theme of the breakfast was the Constitution and youth citizenship, with the aim of facilitating dialogue around the Constitution - specifically from the point of view of young people. The event was the first of its kind in this series. Proceedings started with an ice-breaker, to create an atmosphere of openness and encourage the students to be responsive and participate in the day's dialogue - while respecting each other's viewpoints. The first speaker for the day was Ms Jessica Dewhurst, Co-Founder and Director of the Edmund Rice Justice Desk, which advocates for human rights across South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Jessica has a Masters in Social Development and has received various awards for her work, including the Queens' Young Leader Award for 2016.

The second speaker was Ms Michaela (Chaeli) Mycroft, a notable ability activist. Chaeli co-founded the Chaeli Campaign, an organisation that promotes and provides for the educational needs of children with disabilities. She is an award-winning activist who was awarded the first medal for social activism by the Nobel Peace Laureates. Chaeli is also a recipient of the International Children's Prize, whose recipients include internationally renowned Malala Yousafzai.

After introducing themselves to the learners and giving a brief overview of their work, the floor was opened for questions from the learners. The most prominent topic was voter apathy among the youth. The learners spoke about loyalty voting and the lack of voter education, which leads to a reluctance to participate when they come of age.

One learner stated that that he felt that government needs to do more in terms of educating the youth about the importance of voting. This view was shared by many other learners. Another student said that whilst the youth is fast becoming politically aware, the apathy stemmed from the notion that they are forced to pick between the lesser of the available evils.

Both Chaeli and Jessica applauded the learners on their insights. Jessica encouraged the students to take the opportunity to change the direction of the country by voting. She brought their attention to the daily human rights violations that some South Africans endure and that when one sees what is wrong in the nation, the inclination to vote should be stirred. She emphasised the importance of voting as a mechanism for change. With regard to leadership, she asked the learners to imagine the kind of leaders they want and deserve, and when voting, to make a decision that will produce those kind of leaders.

Chaeli brought the learner's attention to the Constitution and highlighted that fact that it laid the foundation for the country that South Africa *could* be but that the youth needed to act on the Constitution in order to claim the rights therein. She spoke about her personal obstacles as a person with a disability and said "apartheid ended but I also feel like, disabled people, we live in our own kind of apartheid. We have our human rights but we have to claim them." She pointed out that the Constitution protects disability rights but people are still unaware and exclude people with disabilities. Jessica echoed the point concerning discrimination by noting that "we are obsessed with differences and using those differences to justify treating people differently."

There was overwhelming participation on the part of the learners. They came together with the idea that one must learn from the past to build a better future. A highlight of the morning was when one learner identified love as an element that we all need to assist in the equal treatment of all people. The speakers and learners vehemently agreed with this statement and Jessica echoed these sentiments by stating that "if we truly believe in human rights and that we are equal, we should be treating each other with love and respect."

In conclusion, the panellists encouraged the students to find ways to transform society and engage in justice work at schools in the form of movements such as anti-bullying campaigns. They told the students to find their passions and use them to change society. The speakers impressed upon the learners the need to not simply complain about things but to vote to change those things about which they are unhappy. In reference to working towards change, Chaeli asked the students "what history are we going to make that is worthy of telling future generations?"

It was refreshing to share ideas and thoughts with a group of vibrant and eager students. Their desire to continue the discussion inspires one to believe for a better future led by young people who want to work towards a Constitutionally effective generation. The dialogue further highlights how much young South Africans have in common; a desire for an improved society, based on the respect and observance of constitutional values.