

A helping hand



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Governments are not always on the side of the people. Throughout history, there has always been a group of people who are oppressed by their country. This was the case for South Africa during the later half of the twentieth century. A time when apartheid allowed the government to discriminate against black and colored South Africans. When racist and inhumane treatment is institutionalized and deeply ingrained in society, it takes more than one marginalized voice to make a change for themselves or to step outside of the submission that has been forced on them since birth. It takes someone on the other side to step in and lend a hand. In *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane, Mark's personal strength is not enough to set him up for success. In a country where everything is stacked against him, it would have been impossible for him to succeed without the assistance of white people.

One of the first positive interactions Mark has with white people is with the Smiths, the family that Mark's grandmother works for. They give Mark lots of hand-me-downs from their son, such as clothes and games, but most importantly, they give him comic books. "Having never owned a comic book in my life, I tirelessly read them over and over again, the parts I could understand. Such voracious reading was like an anesthesia, numbing me to the harsh life around me." (Mathabane, 170). Reading the comic books helps Mark forget about the atrocities around him. They ease the pain of the hunger, violence, poverty, and fear that are constants in his life. Having this getaway allows Mark to focus on his education and his dream of going to college in America.

The Smith family assisted Mark in more ways than one. Their kindness gave Mark the interest that pushed him to success, but their ignorance gave him

the determination. More specifically, the racist and untrue beliefs of their son, Clyde. In his school, Clyde is taught that black South Africans are stupid and have smaller brains than whites because they can't speak or understand English. He tells this to Mark and unintentionally motivates him to learn the language. "The remark that black people had smaller brains and were thus incapable of reading, speaking, or writing English like the white people had so wounded my ego that I vowed that, whatever the cost, I would master English... Finally, I had something to aspire to." (Mathabane, 192). Clyde's narrow-minded views give Mark a goal to work toward. Although learning English is an extremely long and difficult process for him, the hurtful comments provide enough motivation to drive him to succeed. The ability to speak English allows Mark to interact better with other helpful white people and to prove himself to the majority who aren't so helpful.

Various sport influences also aid Mark in overcoming the challenges he is faced with. Mark meets several white tennis players that help him improve in the game and advance in the white world. One of these players is Helmut, a German man who befriends Mark and doesn't believe the stereotypes about black people. "'If there's anything I can do to help you,' he said one afternoon, 'please let me know. I am your friend. I'd even risk my life for you. I know you may not believe me, but I'm serious. I don't see you as a black man but as another human being, with the same needs, feelings, and dreams as any white man.'" (Mathabane, 280). Helmut recognizes that Mark is a human and doesn't deserve to be treated so poorly. He takes Mark into the white world to play tennis and gives him the support he needs to become a better tennis player. Helmut also encourages Mark to participate in his first

tennis tournament, the South African Breweries Open, where Mark eventually meets Stan Smith, a famous white tennis player who helps him tremendously. Without Helmut's help and support, Mark would miss so many important opportunities that ultimately allow him to leave South Africa.

While he is competing in the South African Breweries Open, Mark meets Stan Smith and his wife Marjorie. Stan plays tennis with Mark and gives him the supplies he needs to continue playing the sport, such as new rackets and clothes. After they become friends, Stan pays to send Mark to compete in the Sugar Circuit, another tennis tournament. " Stan told Owen that he would pay for all my expenses to the tournaments in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town." (Mathabane, 312). Mark's family is extremely poor, they rarely have enough money for food and they struggle to pay for education. They would have to work nonstop for a year to be able to pay for this tournament. For anyone coming from Mark's situation, going to the Sugar Circuit would be impossible, but with Stan's assistance, Mark is able to participate.

Stan and Marjorie Smith give Mark the support he needs not just in tennis, but also to face the racism of South Africa and continue working toward his goal of going to college in America. They know that the color of his skin doesn't determine his character and they believe in him and his dreams of leaving South Africa to play tennis. When they go back to the United States, Mark is upset, but he is also filled with the support and motivation needed to create a happy life for himself. " Our being together, their understanding of my life and dreams and their encouragement that I remain resolute in my faith that in the end things would work out for the good had filled me with hope for the future..." (Mathabane, 311). Giving Mark the optimism that his

life could be better is already much more than he could've ever imagined, but if it weren't for Stan, Mark may never have been able to go to college in the United States. Stan talks to several people in America who send Mark applications and scholarship forms. Alone, Mark wouldn't have the resources to get those life-altering papers or to go to America. With the help of Stan and Marjorie, however, it is possible.

In *Kaffir Boy*, Mark relied on the assistance of white people to help him succeed in his struggle against the oppression of South Africa. Always expected to be obedient and to lead a purposeless life, it seems an insurmountable task to rise up and do what nobody expected of him. To overcome the challenges and racism that he faces every day. Although many white people support the system of apartheid, the few that don't have the ability to change Mark's world. By lending a helping hand, those people give Mark the opportunity that so few South Africans have. They give him the opportunity to succeed.