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Hope for Rwanda

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45



KIGALI, RWANDA. JANUARY 14, 2016. Twelve Taylor students shuffle silently through the Kigali Genocide Memorial. The walls surround them with photos of the fallen, notes about children who were slaughtered, and displays that outline the origins of the nightmare that was the Rwandan genocide.

Moments ago, they'd sat and watched a video of survivors talking about the loved ones they'd lost and what this memorial meant to them. They loved coming here, they said, because when they did, they felt close to their loved ones again.

Tommy Weber '16 didn't understand this. If he lost his family, he thought, the last place he'd want to go was a place built to remind him of how they died.

He thought about the woman who'd lost her children. Just days before, they and the neighbor children had played together peacefully. Then, the neighbors killed her babies. *I don't know how to trust people anymore.*

On the top floor of the memorial, Leah Crabb '18 stopped before a display. It was about a different genocide. One that had taken place in another country in the early nineties. One she knew nothing about. In fact, most of the genocides represented on this floor she'd never heard of.

"It really struck me how many millions of people had been affected, and their stories weren't allowed to be told," she said.

Tommy and Leah were part of a group of 12 Taylor students and three faculty who, this past January, traveled to Rwanda and Uganda. The trip combined three classes: Ethnic and Minority Issues, Sociology of Rwanda, and Documentary Filmmaking.

Leah, a psychology major and natural listener who plans to become a licensed counselor, was drawn by the Ethnic and Minority Issues class. Tommy, a film and media production major who jumps at every chance to tell stories—whether writing screenplays for his own videos or playing Dungeons and Dragons with friends on campus—was excited to practice filmmaking in an international setting.

After committing to the trip last fall, the group met semi-weekly to learn the history and cultures of both countries. They watched films and documentaries on the Rwandan genocide. Dr. Michael Jessup, Professor of Sociology, shared knowledge and experience from his studies and four previous mission trips to the region.

When J-term convened, they spent the first week on campus, reading, studying, and planning. The film class, led by Assistant Professor of Media Communication Stephen Bailey, prepared to document a story they hadn't yet identified. Then, they launched from the Indianapolis airport.

While the rest of the world looked away, an estimated 200,000 people brutally raped women and murdered entire families.

More than 800,000 Rwandan men, women, and children died at the hands of their neighbors and supposed friends in just over a hundred days, beginning early April 1994.

It's debatable whether or not the genocide had been a long time brewing, but tribalism was nothing new. The resentment between the Hutu and Tutsi people reached back decades, with strong ties to colonial favoritism.

When a plane crash claimed the life of the Rwandan president on April 6, 1994, hostile Hutu leaders saw their chance and grabbed it, taking over the capital, Kigali, and blaming the Tutsi for the president's death. Anti-Tutsi messages were broadcasted over the radio, setting ablaze the festering resentment. Detailed lists of Tutsi targets, including names, addresses, and in some cases license plates, were released to the Hutu, calling for their destruction. Hutu militia groups set up roadblocks and began slaughtering Tutsis. The message to Hutu civilians: kill or be killed.

While the rest of the world looked away, an estimated 200,000 people brutally raped women and murdered entire families—Tutsi for being Tutsi, Hutu for not participating.

As the carnage continued, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-led group made up largely of Rwandans in exile from earlier conflicts with the Hutu, started making inroads in northern Rwanda.

By June, RPF controlled most of northern and eastern Rwanda. July 4, the force took over Kigali. Hutu fled the country.

A new coalition government was established with Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, as president and Paul Kagame, a Tutsi and RPF leader, as vice president and defense minister.

Only two years after the genocide, when Rwanda's prisons were overflowing and thousands of Hutu refugees began pouring back into Rwanda from the Congo, the government suspended génocidaire arrests and issued a call to forgiveness. Two decades later, Rwanda is not the country it was then.

There's a difference between reading or hearing third-hand about the genocide, and meeting face-to-face the people who lived through it. Their second full day in the country, the team visited the [memorial](#). They walked the courtyard and halls, learned the favorite colors of children who'd been killed, looked out across the gardens and graves flanked by signs declaring, *Never again*.

Then, the team went to ALARM (African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries), where they sat down with survivors and listened.

The genocide was no longer a distant reality.

"Jesus tells us to love your neighbor as yourself—I have a hard time loving people who annoy me, let alone somebody who killed my entire family."

Sitting around a table, listening to the survivors, the film team mentally prepared for their first interviews and recorded initial footage. The sociology students were in sponge mode, soaking up everything the survivors said so they could wrestle with it later.

One man's story struck Leah:

People had come to his house to kill him. They thought he was a Tutsi. He was a Hutu. They didn't believe him. *Prove it. Come with us*. To save his own life, he went and killed others.

"That really made me think, what would I do in that situation?" Leah said. After all, at its core, genocide is just repeated murders carried out by masses of people. One person kills another, over and over again, multiplied by hundreds and thousands. "What does it take for one person to do that?"

Two days later, at a conference for Rwandan pastors where Jessup led a reconciliation workshop, another man shared his story:

“Members of his congregation killed his wife and six children,” Jessup said.

How do you forgive that? How do you forgive any of it?

“Jesus tells us to love your neighbor as yourself—I have a hard time loving people who annoy me, let alone somebody who killed my entire family,” Tommy said. “And going beyond that, forgiving them? That’s something else.”

The call for Rwandans to forgive one another was initially a government order. Only Rwandans can say whether or not forgiveness was and is genuine. Limitations on freedom of speech restrict what Rwandans will openly tell foreigners, especially those with video cameras.

The film team hadn’t planned to make their documentary about the genocide. “But we get there, and it’s such a thick part of their history and culture,” Tommy said, that it couldn’t be ignored. They’d prompt their interview subjects with a few general questions and then just let them talk, tell their stories as only they could.

Inevitably in every interview, whether or not they asked the question, the genocide came up. And, along with it, the subjects’ hopes for Rwanda’s future.

The team asked a school administrator if he thought the country would ever get past the genocide.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to,” Tommy remembers him answering.

Rwanda is defined by the genocide. Not in the sense that it holds them back or hovers over the nation, casting shadows on any perceived progress—but in the sense that they have lived through its horror and harnessed it to unite them.

They are no longer Hutu or Tutsi. They are Rwandan.

Thinking back on the trip, Leah was struck again by the number of genocides around the world she had never heard of. It seemed bold for Rwanda to erect a memorial on a mass grave of more than 250,000 victims.

“It was pretty heavy for all of us,” she said, “and at the same time, almost beautiful that they were so willing to remember it.”

When Tommy returned home and saw his two-year-old nephew’s face, memories of the mother’s story and the horrors that befell children came flooding back.

“When you’re presented with such a tragedy, you’re left with either letting it fester and . . . turn to hatred and repeating the cycle all over again,” Tommy said, “or you stop and you breathe and you think, ‘What are the good things I can at least salvage from this?’”

For Leah and Tommy, and others on the trip, seeing this mindset was both moving and challenging: Do they really mean it? Have they truly forgiven? Can two decades of government-ordered forgiveness really transform a nation?

From what they could see, the answer is yes and no. The country's past isn't resolved. There's more to struggle with, more to wrestle through, more to document and ponder. Where forgiveness has taken root in Rwandan hearts, there is room for growth. And where it hasn't, Rwandans share this in common:

Never again.

The film team is making the final touches on their documentary, which focuses on the hope and future of Rwanda from the perspectives of those they met in January.



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