

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

7 Every Wednesday through June 11, join us for **Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide**, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

Chapter Seven

MARIE'S STORY: A WITNESS TO THE LONG TERM CONSEQUENCES OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

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Throughout 100 days in 1994, an estimated 800,000 Tutsis, and Hutus who sympathized with Tutsis, were killed in Rwanda during the fastest genocide in modern history. In 2007, Marie Berry, a graduate of the University of Washington, traveled to Rwanda with Global Youth Connect, to work with orphans of the genocide and explore the state of human rights in Rwanda today.

As the gatekeeper slowly pushed open the first door, I stood frozen with horror. Behind me lurked a tall dark man I had seen before in pictures — I recognized him by the deep bullet wound scarring his left brow. Beyond the open door lay dozens of bodies. Somewhere here, at the sight of one of the Rwandan genocide's most horrific massacres, lay the family of the tall man behind me. Lime powder, for preservation, dusted the dead bodies of men, women and small children — all murdered 14 years ago in this room where I was now standing. The bodies lay there, frozen in time, as a reminder and a memorial of the genocide that took the lives of 800,000 people.

Seven years earlier, I sat in my World History class as a sophomore in high school. A list of research topics circulated the room. By the time the list reached me, the selection had dwindled. Toward the bottom of the list was a single word: Rwanda. I had a vague idea that Rwanda was a country in Africa, and, assuming I would be researching gorillas, I wrote my name next to my selection. That night, my parents mentioned something about an "ethnic conflict," and referred me to a book recently published about Rwanda, "We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families" (Gourevitch, 1998).



Marie Berry with children in Rwanda, 2007

Over the next several years, I continued to research Rwanda, genocide and the roots of ethnic conflict. Finally, in June 2007, I arrived in Rwanda. The country I found seemed tranquil and safe in comparison to the country I had read about during the genocide. It was strikingly beautiful and although many Rwandan people bore the scars of their recent history, they amazed me with their kindness and generosity. As I went to work at *Uyisenga N'Manzi*, an organization that helps child-headed households establish economic self-sufficiency, I met dozens of children struggling to create a sense of normalcy in their lives after the deaths of their parents. Hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned during the genocide [UNICEF]. Even today, 14 years after the genocide, nearly 100,000 children still live in child-headed households [UNICEF]. Organizations such as *Uyisenga N'Manzi*, which provides economic, legal, mental and medical assistance, are essential to the rebuilding of the fractured nation.

To my initial surprise, most of the Rwandan people with whom I worked closely were reluctant to discuss their own experiences during the genocide. I met only one young man, named Musoni, who was eager to divulge his personal nightmare. He took me to his parents' grave, showed me where his mother was struck down with a machete while his infant brother clung to her back, and where his sister was flung into a deep well with dozens of other bodies and left for dead.

The political climate in Rwanda today discourages people from speaking about their memories of the genocide, except in court where cases against perpetrators are still being tried. The Rwandan government recently prohibited usage of the words "Hutu" and "Tutsi" in an effort to expedite the country's return to normalcy. Yet, visible tensions still remain. Many survivors expressed concern that testifying in court would jeopardize their safety.

After my return to Seattle, I resumed my work with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center. One of my first projects was to locate Rwandans living in the Seattle area and encourage them to join our speakers bureau of genocide survivors. Yet, everyone I talked to declined to participate, ostensibly because it is still too difficult to speak. Fourteen years is not long enough to dissolve pain, to "forgive and forget." Yet 14 years has been enough time for genocide to occur again, first in Bosnia and more recently in Darfur, Sudan. My extensive research on Rwanda and my experiences there enabled me to recognize the lasting impact of genocide in every society, the profundity of trauma and the relevance of these atrocities to our lives, as human beings halfway across the world. Perhaps, most importantly, I learned that genocide isn't ancient history; it is our history, and it is up to us to never forget.

For more information on this article, or others in this series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center: www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❖ Approximately 100,000 children still live in child-headed households. What do you think it would feel like to be a child having to raise younger brothers and sisters, finding a job, shopping for groceries, cooking meals and paying all the bills?
- ❖ The article states that "the political climate in Rwanda discourages people from speaking about their memories of the genocide, except in court." Do you think not speaking about their experiences will help them heal? Why or why not?
- ❖ Choose an article in today's newspaper where people are going through difficult times and share with your class.