



Learning Abroad Learning Within



The college's Senior Seminar June Term in Rwanda provided numerous opportunities for students to reflect on how their training and talents could be put to use in leading and serving a world in need.

As they traveled through the nation they were quickly befriended by the children that they met. They also confronted the sobering statistic that some 45 percent of Rwandan children under five live in poverty.

In September 2005, Paul Rusesabagina stepped to the podium in Dimnent Memorial Chapel and told his rapt audience about a society that had been beset by a waking nightmare.

Rusesabagina, the real-life hero of the acclaimed film *Hotel Rwanda*, was speaking in advance of that year's two-day Critical Issues Symposium, "Auschwitz to Darfur: Genocide in the Global Village." While Rwanda was in

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the grips of genocide in 1994—an estimated 800,000 were massacred by extremists in just 100 days—Rusesabagina had sheltered more than 1,200 people at the luxury hotel he managed, working ceaselessly to save them from the militants that surrounded and threatened those within.

In June of this year, a group of 10 students and their two Hope faculty mentors stayed only a few blocks from that same hotel in the capital city of Kigali, in a Rwanda that 16 years after the tragic events of 1994 is widely regarded as one of Africa's success stories and which they found to be safe and peaceful. They were there to learn about the Rwanda that was and the Rwanda that is and, crucially, to consider their place in a complex world with deep needs, and to enhance their understanding of how they might help meet them.

There were no easy answers.

"It seemed like everything contradicted everything else," said Adam Nelson of Elmhurst, Ill.

While memorial sites and reflections from those with whom the Hope contingent spoke demonstrated the horrors and lasting impact of the genocide and deep ethnically

based resentments, the class also found hope expressed through Rwanda's "reconciliation villages"—in some cases former perpetrators and former victims literally live next door to one another. They learned about a bank with a Christian focus that provided resources for local entrepreneurship, but also saw pervasive poverty that such initiatives could not address. They visited a national park to observe mountain gorillas, an opportunity to understand how the nation is emphasizing eco-tourism and sustainable development—and realized that many Rwandans are too poor to afford a visit to their own national treasure.

"There's a lot of give-and-take," Nelson said. "It sparked a lot of good discussion with the other students and Annie and Joel [faculty leaders Dr. Annie Dandavati and Dr. Joel Toppen '91]."

The course reflects the college's ongoing commitment to, as Hope's mission statement notes, "educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society." Hope offers programs on six of the seven continents (nothing in Antarctica—so far), including semester-long and full-year experiences as well as shorter-term courses

genocide; we could look at the economic perspective; we could look at issues related to reconciliation; and we could explore vocation—to see where the students' excitement and passion, not just to make a living, fits with what the needs of the world are," said Dr. Dandavati, who is a professor of political science and director of women's studies.

Dr. Toppen, an associate professor of political science who had previously made more than a dozen trips to Sub-Saharan Africa, likewise appreciated the way that the destination and theme provided an opportunity to engage issues, learning and life in a holistic way.

"From our perspective, this course represents what a Hope College education ought to be—engaged, relevant, combining the spiritual and cultural, and all of it coming together into one experience," Dr. Toppen said.

"When students are confronted with these realities that they see and learn about Rwanda, they're forced to think about their role in this global society and what their responsibilities are, particularly with reference to genocide and poverty," he said.

The professors provided the students with an advance reading list and met with each before the trip to talk about the learning ahead—and also how to approach it. "We went there with humility, with grace, as learners," Dr. Dandavati said.

The students and faculty met people who had been on both sides of the genocide. They spoke with leaders—such as a bank CEO, a bishop and a documentary filmmaker—about Rwanda's present and future. They sat down for a meal with university students. They visited orphanages—and were swarmed by enthusiastic children. They learned that Rwanda is a leader internationally in involving women in senior roles, with women comprising more than half of its parliament. They saw how local, national and even international organizations are all seeking to address the nation's endemic poverty (some 45 percent of the children under five are malnourished). They worshiped with Rwandans at local churches—and saw how the people's faith shaped their approach and commitment to reconciliation and change.

"It's inspiring to see and meet people who are rebuilding and moving forward, working hard and taking their responsibilities seriously," Dr. Toppen said.

Together, the faculty and students also confronted what they were experiencing and their response to it, not only through discussion across the duration of the course but also via a class blog in which they recorded and shared their thoughts.


"Being in Rwanda has opened my eyes to the face of injustice, the power of reconciliation and the true calling of Christians to loosen the chains of injustice," said Sarah Wenz of Barrington, Ill. "Rwanda is a beautiful country with a lot to say, and the world should listen."

"The trip to Rwanda was extremely engaging yet challenging and intense," said Brenda Cuellar of Fennville, Mich. "It has expanded my way of thinking and made me realize that I want to study development in a third world country. Rwanda has an intriguing and challenging past because of the genocide. Being able to see Rwanda in the condition it is in and the great programs of reconciliation, has motivated me to continue my studies in this area. Rwanda was a great experience."

Drs. Dandavati and Toppen were both pleased with the spirit with which the students approached the class and the impact that it had on them. "Many of them described it as a life-changing experience," Dr. Toppen said.

The two professors are hoping that they'll be able to offer the course again—eager to help a new group of students learn not only about the world but their place in it along the way.

They're not the only ones.

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Hope's June Term in Rwanda provided not only in-person encounters with the nation's political and social circumstances but reflection regarding the students' place in a complex world with deep needs and how they might help meet them.

