

Rwandans receive lesson in peacemaking program

Local effort focuses on training children

By Katya Cengel

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Sizeri Marcellin can recount almost every hour of the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed.

His cousin was killed at 9 o'clock on the morning after the plan carrying the Rwandan president was shot down, spurring the start of the genocide. Five days later, he found his father had been murdered. His wife and youngest son were killed the same night he sought shelter in a stadium in the capital of Kigali.

But in 1995, with the genocide over, Marcellin sought reconciliation, not revenge, and joined a group of Rwandan Quakers working to heal wounds through conflict mediation and other nonviolent methods.

This week Marcellin was one of four Rwandans taking part in a similar program for children being taught by the Peace Education Program of Louisville.

"We have a saying," said Marcellin, 55. "If you want to strengthen a tree, you start while it is still young."

It is a belief the Peace Education Program has been promoting since it was founded by Louisville Quakers 25 years ago. The program teaches adults to use games and other interactive programs to train children to mediate conflicts among their peers.



Baraka Paulette, left, and Samvura Antoine, far right, laughed as they participated in a conflict resolution seminar this week at Central Presbyterian Church in Old Louisville. Both Paulette and Antoine are from Rwanda. (By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal)

"Young people understand each other's problems better, they have a better sense of how to help each other solve their problems," said program director Eileen Blanton.

The program is now used in 155 schools in seven counties in Kentucky and Southern Indiana, Blanton said. Rwanda may be next.

Last year, while touring the United States to talk about his work, David Bucuru, another Rwandan Quaker engaged in conflict resolution with adults, met Blanton and expressed a desire to learn more about working with children.

"We saw that doing peace education with children is to build our society, to build our country, and we hope to have a good country in the future if we start to build with the children," he said.

The program raised \$10,000 to bring Bucuru and three others to Louisville. With the help of a local Rwandan they translated the program's 150-plus-page manual into Kinyarwanda, one of the country's three official languages. Much of the manual is filled with games, like one in which a ball is passed around and each person must repeat what the previous person said before adding their own words. The exercise involves being a good listener, the most important trait a mediator can possess, Blanton said.

The lessons will translate easily to Rwanda, Bucuru said: "Children are the same all over the world."

Baraka Paulette liked the idea of teaching children to teach other children, spreading the message far more

quickly than she could on her own as a psychologist in Kigali. Paulette left nursing, she said, after she realized there were wounds doctors weren't addressing.

"I found I had more potential to help people" psychologically than physically, she said.

Marcellin is also helping society heal its emotional wounds as a judge in a reconciliation court program.

There will always be conflict, Marcellin said, but bad can be turned to good. And like a wound, it is easier to treat when it is small, he said. The same, he said, can be said for children.

The Rwandans' commitment to nonviolent conflict resolution taught Blanton something as well, she said:

"If it can work in the face of genocide, certainly it can work everywhere else. We just have to have the skills, the commitment, the courage and the support."

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By Steve Darbin, The Courier-Journal