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Story and Photo By Melissa Moody

Rwandans torn by genocide visit Louisville to learn about moving forward



David Bucura: a Quaker pastor from Kigali, Rwanda, and Steve Brady, a counselor at Indian Trail Elementary School in Louisville, participated in a group activity discussing what they had learned during the Peace Education Program.

“It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world: it’s nonviolence or non-existence; that is where we are today.” —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

At a gathering at the Friends Peace House in Kigali, Rwanda, Quaker pastor David Bucura shows videos of Martin Luther King Jr., Ghandi and Nelson Mandela. Following each video, after the people in the darkened room adjust their eyes to the light of their own particular situation, Bucura initiates a discussion on how to bring peace to Rwanda, a country destroyed by genocide only 13 years prior, and how to apply the principles of peace to a country ravaged by hate.

But here in Louisville, Bucura sits on the other side of the desk. As part of the 25th anniversary celebration of the Peace Education Program of Louisville, Bucura and five other Rwandans who focus on teaching nonviolent conflict resolution in their country came to Kentucky to learn more skills for achieving peace in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide.

“We lost everything, we lost

family members, we lost property,” Bucura said. “We started again at zero. To the average people, it is not possible to rebuild — most adults, we are destroyed.”

Bucura was 28 years old when, in the span of 100 days, more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were exterminated in what some call the most “effective” state-sponsored genocide in world history. Men murdered babies, pastors murdered members of their own congregations and all Hutus large and small were called to murder their Tutsi neighbors. RTL (Radio-Television Libre Milles Collines), a station organized by a group of Hutu extremists including then-President Juvenal Habyarimana and a coterie of his closest supporters, issued unequivocal calls to murder, broadcasting, “the graves are not yet full. Who is going to do the good work and help us finish them [Tutsis] completely?”

The United Nations, with only a handful of peacekeepers in Rwanda, and the United States government mostly observed the massacre from a distance. Bucura, sitting at a table at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Louisville two weeks ago, said “people dying, everyday, everyday, everyday and why no U.N., no United States?”

But now the United States seems ready to step in, if not the government then non-profit agencies like the Peace Education Program of Louisville and the Center for Interfaith Relations. And Bucura,

now 41, is more than ready to accept the long-awaited offers of assistance.

Overcoming those 100 days seems insurmountable, but the obstacles to peace in Rwanda extend much further into history than the genocide that began in April 1994. Tension between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority began before the European colonization of Africa in the 19th century, and was only exacerbated by colonists’ attempts at ruling by dividing to conquer.

“Peacekeepers failed, the world failed,” Bucura said. “But immediately after the genocide we started with our people. We need peace and reconciliation.”

For Bucura, the focus must be on the future, not the past. And the Peace Education Program, which sponsored the nonviolent conflict resolution program that brought Bucura and five other Rwandans to Louisville, agrees. “If the future is to be good, it starts with the children,” Bucura said. “For the child, it is no problem — the children can’t distinguish between Hutu and Tutsi.”

The Peace Education Program started teaching nonviolent conflict resolution to youth at Lassiter Middle School in Louisville 25 years ago. The program now has adults teaching youth conflict resolution at 155 schools in seven counties.

The Peace Education Program and Center for Interfaith Relations brought Rwandans who are teaching nonviolent conflict resolution in their country together with educators and

adults in Kentucky and Indiana who are doing the same in their schools.

“It is very difficult for a person outside their country to understand,” said Cliff Irons, youth services coordinator at Iroquois High School. “But the approach you learn here can be applied in both situations.” The approach of the Peace Education Program focuses on teaching mediation skills to youth through games and role-play, as well as simply listening to both sides without judging. The program also teaches youth to become mediators themselves.

At Indian Trail Elementary, “we have kids teaching kids how to solve problems,” said counselor Steve Brady. “They’re on their level and can identify their problems. It feels good when we can come up with solutions to our own problems.”

“In the beginning it was not easy,” Bucura said. “For our people now, we see the difference. People would not sit together at church or at dinner; now women who have a husband in prison visit women whose husbands were killed. Prisoners and victims, at the beginning, to sit together was not easy, but at the end they embrace each other. We are healing.”

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