

Building on the strength of 'Hotel Rwanda' -- and hope

Spud Hilton, San Francisco Chronicle
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Call me shallow, but I wasn't thrilled about going to see "Hotel Rwanda." My only relevant memory was of watching tens of thousands of grisly hacking deaths in full color on CNN during that country's mass ethnic slaughter a decade ago. Other than that, I had no deeper understanding of the place -- no connection -- and, frankly, not a lot of motivation to seek one. It's not a place I'm likely to travel anytime soon.

But thanks to the Oscar-nominated movie, there'll be a bathroom in Burundi with my name on it. Oh, and possibly a broom closet.

Truthfully, the thanks go to Prosper Ndabishuriye, a man who wasn't in the movie -- or even Rwanda -- but who lived it in neighboring Burundi, where painfully similar ethnic warfare has devastated that country for 40 years.

Ndabishuriye is a founder and the leader of Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction, a non-governmental organization trying to rebuild Burundi -- structurally and psychologically -- through the construction of homes. We met during a small benefit at a fellow travel writer's Glen Park home, where he was trying to raise awareness and funds for the mud-brick homes, which cost about \$700 to build.

Ndabishuriye, a soft-spoken man in black trousers, a blue-and-white dashiki and square-nosed cowboy boots, talked about the simple, healing act of building, not for Hutus or Tutsis, but for Burundians who need a home. The group, working with The Heritage Institute in Clinton, Wash., is building 800 homes in Burundi, where civil warfare left more than half the country's buildings in smoldering piles. Priority, he said, goes to orphans and widows (of which there are a staggering number) and to the sick and aged.

Even the well-traveled crowd at the benefit was a bit relieved when Ndabishuriye pulled out a map to point out Burundi. The country in Central Africa is about the size of Maryland with 6.2 million people, a number that, unfortunately, dips suddenly when armed Hutu or Tutsi militias choose to go on another mass killing spree. Since 1993, when the first democratically elected president was assassinated, sparking a gruesome free-for-all, more than 500,000 Burundians lost their lives, not to foreign armies or terrorists but to their neighbors and compatriots.

Needless to say, the political history is complex. The Belgians, who colonized the region including Rwanda and Burundi, played a hefty role when they decided to register and identify all citizens based on tribe -- and then heavily favored Tutsi citizens through politics, laws and responsibilities. According to Ndabishuriye, tribes that had little trouble getting along before have been warring ever since. The Belgians exercised their exit strategy in 1962, leaving a steady flow of assassinations, coups, civil wars and refugees fleeing all of the above.

Rebuilding and fostering peace in this situation isn't easy or safe. Ndabishuriye has been moments from his own murder -- at the hands of Hutu and Tutsi madmen -- enough times to truly appreciate the need for peace.

He talked about times when his team's bus was stopped by Hutus who demanded that all the Tutsis get out "so they can be killed," Ndabishuriye said, and by Tutsis who wanted revenge on Hutus. Each time, members of the group told soldiers they would have to kill all of them.

Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction, according to the group's Web site, has set a goal of raising at least 1,600 more homes in the next five years. Ndabishuriye, standing before an expansive view of the bay, pointed out that, for the median price of a home in San Francisco, he

could build more than 900 homes in Burundi, each housing six to 10 people.

Ndabishuriye is working for connections: between Hutus and Tutsis; between Burundians and their culture; between youth and future leadership; and, most important, between the vast displaced population and real homes and security. He's also seeking a tie between Burundi and the rest of the world, a task made difficult by the country's remarkable lack of easily bankable commodities (no diamonds, gold or oil) and its nonexistent tourism (no rustic- but-trendy wine region, no white-sand tropical beaches, no Hard Rock Cafe).

Unlike the movie "Sideways," which, not surprisingly, has inspired thousands to flock to wineries in the Santa Ynez Valley, "Hotel Rwanda" isn't likely to do much for tourism to Central Africa.

What the film did, however, is give context for Ndabishuriye's real stories of horror and hope -- a connection to real people with real needs who, for what ever reason, have fallen off the radar.

When the talk was over, I wrote a check -- not enough for a whole house, but it's a start. I don't know if you can call it a connection or a deeper understanding; I do now know where Burundi is on the map, I've met one of its remarkable people and somewhere there's bathroom that I helped put there. Oh, and possibly a broom closet.

Connections to places don't always require going there. It can be a conversation, a book, a donation or, well, a movie.

For more information

For details on the work of Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction, go to www.jrmd.org (the Web site uses the initials of the organization's name in French.)

For general information about Burundi, see www.africaguide.com/country/burundi. The U.S. State Department warns against travel to Burundi; for details, go to travel.state.gov/travel/warnings.htm or call (888) 407-4747.

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