

## Movie Hits Home With Students

*AMY McFALL PRINCE, Columbian staff writer*  
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Getting high school seniors to do their homework isn't always easy, especially when graduation is in sight.

But Skyview High School students were eager to get this assignment in their British literature class: Go see "Hotel Rwanda." Teacher Brenda McKinney has taken a centuries-old literary theme an unknown journey and applied it to contemporary problems. The seniors not only get the connections, but they've found their own real life protagonist.

McKinney helped connect the students to **Prosper Ndabishuriye**, a Burundian man who has survived decades of deadly fighting in the small African country similar to the one in "Hotel Rwanda." On a crusade for peace, the 47-year-old man runs an organization to link schools from around the world to students in Burundi.

The Skyview students began corresponding through letters and e-mails with teens in Bujumbura, Burundi. They learned about the decades of fighting between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes and the destruction of entire communities. Then, when the students saw the movie, the whole thing made sense.

"It's hard for us as Americans. We couldn't quite understand the anger; we couldn't quite understand the madness," McKinney said. "When they saw the movie, it really became so real for them.

"If you had one moment where you could say, 'In this moment students learned,' it would be when they saw the movie," McKinney said.

The students have written essays about the movie and about themselves.

"What they've realized is that they're on their own unknown journey," McKinney said.

Many students hope that journey can better connect them with the Burundian people.

### **Helping to change world**

Ndabishuriye has visited the Skyview students twice. He shared his story how relatives had been murdered and towns destroyed. The Hutu told students how the images captured in "Hotel Rwanda" are being played out in many African countries.

"To be called a refugee in your own country is very, very hard," Ndabishuriye told the students during a recent visit. "Together, with you, we will change the situation of the world."

The students began making friendship bracelets to sell at school. The proceeds went to Ndabishuriye's organization, Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction. The money about \$500 built one 600-square-foot house for a Burundian family.

The students were amazed to learn that often families of 15 or more people would be living in these homes.

"It's amazing that they can live like that, and we're sitting here in our name-brand clothes," said Aly Eastman, a student in McKinney's class.

Eastman and about two dozen classmates are now interested in visiting Ndabishuriye in Burundi next fall.

McKinney is making the trek along with Mike Seymour of The Heritage Institute, a continuing education institute on Whidbey Island. Seymour is Ndabishuriye's U.S. counterpart.

The students have been invited to join the trip if they can raise the \$3,500 needed to pay travel expenses.

Senior Nikki Hinton is interested in going on the trip.

"After seeing the movie, I didn't know what I could do to help," she said. But meeting Ndabishuriye opened an avenue to help.

Classmate Nathan Beck won't be able to join the others on the trip, but he is planning to go on his own sometime in the future.

"This is history happening right now," he said. "It's such a big thing, I feel like I need to do something."

McKinney said some students have told her that before this experience they hadn't thought much about life outside of Vancouver. "It's opened the world to them," she said.

"I feel like through this experience, I've really had a chance to watch kids learn."

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Did you know?

\* About 7 million people live in Burundi.

\* The life expectancy of Burundi's people has declined in recent decades to 41 years.

\* Hundreds of thousands of Burundians have died in recent decades of civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.