

Rebuilding hope for Burundi

South Whidbey students part of AfricaAmericaExchange

By CYNTHIA WOOLBRIGHT

Staff reporter, South Whidbey Record, April 16, 2005

To know his name means "I paid for others" is no surprise. Talk to Prosper Ndabishuriye for five minutes and you'll find this to be true: He is a man with a heart for others, a heart that is ever-expanding for the people and the continent of Africa. He treats his own life as the currency to achieve a dream of peace in his native country of Burundi. Here is but a taste of his story.

On the road to Kwisomo in the Ruyigi Province of Burundi in 1994, Ndabishuriye and a bus load of 53 volunteers were stopped by a roadblock of government soldiers. It was monumental to have that bus filled with members of the Hutu and the Tutsi tribes, two groups that battled for equal rights since the country claimed its independence from colonial rule in 1962. It was landmark to have both groups eager to arrive so they could build homes after decades of ethnic warring between the two groups climaxed during a three-month period the year before, destroying 60 percent of homes, hospitals and schools in the already impoverished country.

But the pinnacle of the day, the moment where Ndabishuriye and the others paid their life toll came as government soldiers boarded the bus with rifles in hand and demanded that Ndabishuriye and other Hutus get off. "If you are going to kill these brothers of ours, you must kill us first," the Tutsi members said. In shock, the soldiers let them go. No one lost their life. The scene was repeated at another roadblock with the Tutsi members as the targets, and the Hutus defiantly telling militia that the mixed group was there as one and as one they would have to go. In shock, the militia let them go. No one lost their life.

That day marked the first of many work trips for the non-governmental agency Jeunesse en Reconstruction du Monde en Destruction (Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction) formed by Ndabishuriye, a former national director for the Campus Crusade for Christ International Ministry.

After witnessing a lifetime of his friends and family harmed and killed in the ethnic battling, the admittedly very religious Ndabishuriye said he realized the people's need went beyond any spiritual advice. "Those people needed physical assistance," he said. "It's hard to promote peace when people don't know where they are going to live. These houses are the foundation for peace in my country."

Youth in Reconstruction has since built 2,000 homes and Ndabishuriye's connection with churches across Africa has turned him into a peacekeeper. Not a single Youth in Reconstruction in a World of Destruction volunteer has been killed, even while continuing to build houses in areas that are considered the most volatile in the world.

"We cannot continue to accuse one another, what we need now is to rebuild," Prosper said. That mission for peace has now brought Prosper Ndabishuriye to 15 U.S. schools — including Langley Middle School and Bayview High School — as part of AfricaAmericaExchange, a program of Youth for a New World, a Whidbey-based organization founded by South Whidbey resident Mike Seymour that inspires and brings young people together globally to contribute to a world that works for all.

Youth for a New World (YNW) and the AfricaAmericaExchange was borne last year from an already existing partnership between Ndabishuriye's organization and the Heritage Institute, also headed by Seymour, that for more than 25 years has provided progressive continuing education programs for K-12 educators geared to "educate for humanity." Students from Langley Middle School and Bayview High School, two of 15 schools in Washington, are paired with students from 15 schools in Burundi that exchange correspondence and devote conversation in their classrooms focused on improving the world in which the 1,500 students live.

Each class is visited by Prosper and YNW founder Mike Seymour and follows a three-part curriculum lesson that teaches them about themselves, their new friends and allows them to reach through cultural boundaries. Each U.S. classroom also fundraises to help raise money for home construction and educational materials in Burundi. The emotional bonds that are forming between the U.S. and Burundi students are evident, according to Seymour.

"It's been a wake up call," Seymour said. "Their hearts are breaking and we purposely want it to be that way. Unless they allow themselves to open up, they shut their eyes to the world. They're always in their own thing while the rest of the world goes to hell in a hand basket."

With help from the U.S. students, individual and corporate donations, Youth for a New World has raised \$35,000 this year and \$20,000 last year toward constructing 314 homes of the 800 home goal, providing educational materials and providing other aid. But the work isn't done.

One third of the 314 are completed with doors and windows. The remainder still needs varying stages of doors, windows and roofing, and it is also hoping to construct latrines, and well systems. The AfricaAmericaExchange and Youth for a New World need to raise almost \$400,000 to complete this goal. One two-by-eight-meter mud house with no electricity or plumbing costs less than \$700 to build. That low cost of aid amazed Youth for a New World board member Judy Wheeler.

After watching news reports of the 1990s genocide in Burundi, Wheeler felt hopeless. With word of the home construction, she feels hope. "I couldn't do anything to stop the genocide but I knew I could help build a house," she said.

The Exchange has impacted Bayview student Kili Sherwood in a way that has driven her to be one of a handful of local students who are fundraising to travel to Burundi in November. While there, she will help build houses and will photograph the life of Burundi to bring back and help educate others of the country's plight. Sherwood has been corresponding with 12 pen pals she also hopes to meet. "This all has made me realize how little I've lived through," Sherwood said. "We as Americans have never experienced what they've had to go through and yet I've never met people filled with more hope and compassion." Sherwood wants to bring a new understanding back with her to South Whidbey, and hopes to pass it along. "This is a lifetime opportunity and my chance to help make a difference even in a small way," Sherwood said.

Through Prosper, Youth for a New World board member Judy Wheeler and others are learning the power of one. "He proves the power of what one person can do, and that one person can make a difference," Wheeler said.

The homes being built are more than just shelter and a roof over head, even though that in itself, Wheeler said, is a great gift to the Burundian people. The houses will enable the people of the country to focus on growing crops and creating a local economy. For Seymour, his work with the Heritage Institute, Youth for a New World and the creation of the AfricanAmericanExchange is all about helping young people become bigger people. "We're opening them up to a bigger world and to feel for that world with their own hearts," Seymour said. "It counteracts the industrial country focus of individualism and always getting ahead as the measure of success."

Prosper is the focus point for Seymour's mission. The Burundi man, whose 47 years outlives the country's life expectancy of 40 for men and 42 for women, is a prime example of the compassionate person Seymour hopes the students become and a catalyst for the students to open their hearts to the suffering occurring in the world. There is courage in risking his life to do the work he does.

"They can say, 'Hey, I know someone and I can make a difference,'" Seymour said.

The exchange has offered much hope and encouragement to Prosper Ndabishuriye and the people the Burundi man feels the world has forgotten.

“There are so many problems in the world today,” Seymour said. “But a better world and a better society aren’t going to happen without people who care just as much for others as they do for themselves.”