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Communications

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Ornella Umubyeyi Experienced Aftermath of Rwandan Genocide

Born in a Christian home in the African nation of Burundi, Ornella Umubyeyi was a young girl when her family moved to the neighboring nation of Rwanda after the 1994 genocide.

According to the United Human Rights Council, 800,000 people were killed in the massacre that lasted three months. The bloodshed was the result of decades of strife between the Hutu ethnic majority and the Tutsi minority. It ended when a Tutsi-led force gained control of the government.

"The country was still broken in many ways," recalled Umubyeyi, a doctoral student in the Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity. "My parents would be singing in hymnals. I would say, 'There are many life challenges. Why are you singing?' My mother would say, 'Sometimes in the darkest time, we see God's light.'"

Umubyeyi wants to share that light with people in her country. By earning a Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Care and Counseling, she hopes to bring healing in a place scarred by years of torture, fighting, death and grief.

"We don't have a lot of ministers who are doing pastoral care and counseling in Rwanda or Burundi," she observed. "I realized I needed to get my doctorate to get all the tools to provide the help they need. I have heard good things about this program, so I chose to come to Gardner-Webb. I really like the classes. They are more practical instead of theory."

While working on her doctorate, Umubyeyi is already helping people in Burundi through her non-profit organization, Soul Survivors International, which is registered for tax-exempt status in America.

"I talk with a lot of young people who had to grow up in the streets — who were prostitutes," Umubyeyi explained. "I have friends who lost their loved ones during wars. I realize how much counseling will be needed. I have been using the funds I get here to put some kids in schools and help single mothers who are HIV/AIDS positive. I want to be involved in ministry, but the kind of ministry I want to be involved in is with people who are struggling."

A new generation may also require her assistance, because recent political unrest in Burundi has resulted in several unexplained murders. Umubyeyi has learned that someone shot and killed her cousin as he was walking down the street. With Twitter and Facebook, Umubyeyi is able to get news quickly about what is going on in her country.

“I’m still mourning someone who was close to me,” she confided. “He was in the university, had dreams to be successful and actually come to America. He kept telling me, ‘I’m learning English and I’m going to come and find you.’ To see his life taken shortly, and innocently — yes, it’s very hard to see that happen again and to see a lot of my friends and family fleeing ... It’s almost like *deja vu*, Rwanda all over again.”

In addition to grieving over the genocide and the recent killings, Umubyeyi gets a sense that Rwandans and Burundians wonder why the rest of the world seems to ignore them.

“Personally, I feel like the world sat and watched the genocide in Rwanda. It could have been on TV, and it’s easy to switch the TV, because, ‘It’s not about me. It’s not about my family, and I don’t know anybody there,’” Umubyeyi shared. “For the other leaders, it was more like Rwanda does not have anything to offer So we felt like because we are a small country that did not have anything for other countries to gain, that’s why they didn’t do anything. For them to come back to try to do a lot of work, we still felt a little bit bitter, because it was too late. There is nothing you can do to replace the people that were taken from us.”

Umubyeyi came to America 10 years ago. “By God’s grace, I got an opportunity to come for high school in Massachusetts to play basketball,” she shared. “God opened the doors.”

She planned to go back home after high school, but people she had never met paid for her to go to college in Wisconsin, and then others paid for her to attend seminary in Chicago. She found GWU while searching on the Internet, called the School of Divinity and Director of Admissions Kheresa Harmon answered.

“We literally had a conversation for two hours,” Umubyeyi confessed. “I am not kidding. When I hung up, I was like, ‘I am going there.’ I loved her. She was very warm, welcoming and funny, and I loved the southern accent.”

As Umubyeyi shared her story, Harmon could sense the power of God’s call on the young woman’s life.

“When my phone rang, I met Ornella and I entered that sacred space that is created by the God who calls and sends,” Harmon recalled. “I heard the most beautiful, melodic voice tell me of her childhood in Rwanda and of the transformative and healing grace of God that reconciles and gives birth to hope. I heard the story of Ornella, a young woman who simply wanted to help people become all that God created them to be.”

Ornella Umubyeyi is available to speak to local churches. Her ministry, Soul Survivors International (SSI) aims to promote, empower and support street children and teenagers struggling in any area. The organization reaches out through health, education, psychological and spiritual development and opportunities to African children by bringing sustainable growth in their lives, as they experience God's love and discover God's calling upon their lives. For more information visit www.ssurvivorsinternational.org.