Chapter Seven

MARIE’S STORY:
A WITNESS TO THE LONG TERM
CONSEQUENCES OF THE RWANDAN
GENOCIDE

Written by Marie Berry, Office Manager and Speakers
Bureau Coordinator, Washington State Holocaust
Education Resource Center

Throughout 100 days in 1994, an estimated 800,000
Tutsis, and Hutus who sympathized with Tutsis,
were killed in Rwanda during the fastest genocide in
modern history. In 2007, Marie Berry, a graduate of
the University of Washington, traveled to Rwanda
with Global Youth Connect, to work with orphans of
the genocide and explore the state of human rights in
Rwanda today.

As the gatekeeper slowly pushed open the first door,
I stood frozen with horror. Behind me lurked a tall
dark man I had seen before in pictures — I recognized
him by the deep bullet wound scarring his left brow.
Beyond the open door lay dozens of bodies. Somewhere
here, at the sight of one of the Rwandan genocide’s
most horrific massacres, lay the family of the tall man
behind me. Lime powder, for preservation, dusted the
dead bodies of men, women and small children — all
murdered 14 years ago in this room where I was now
standing. The bodies lay there, frozen in time, as a
reminder and a memorial of the genocide that took the
lives of 800,000 people.

Seven years earlier, I sat in my World History class as
a sophomore in high school. A list of research topics
circulated the room. By the time the list reached me,
the selection had dwindled. Toward the bottom of the
list was a single word: Rwanda. I had a vague idea
that Rwanda was a country in Africa, and, assuming
I would be researching gorillas, I wrote my name next
to my selection. That night, my parents mentioned
something about an “ethnic conflict,” and referred me
to a book recently published about Rwanda, “We Wish
to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With
Our Families” (Gourevitch, 1998).

Over the next several years, I continued to research
Rwanda, genocide and the roots of ethnic conflict.
Finally, in June 2007, I arrived in Rwanda. The country
I found seemed tranquil and safe in comparison to the
country I had read about during the genocide. It
was strikingly beautiful and although many Rwandan
people bore the scars of their recent history, they
amazed me with their kindness and generosity. As I
went to work at Uyisenga N’Manzi, an organization
that helps child-headed households establish economic
self-sufficiency, I met dozens of children struggling
to create a sense of normalcy in their lives after the
deaths of their parents. Hundreds of thousands of
children were orphaned during the genocide [UNICEF].
Even today, 14 years after the genocide, nearly
100,000 children still live in child-headed households
[UNICEF]. Organizations such as Uyisenga N’Manzi,
which provides economic, legal, mental and medical
assistance, are essential to the rebuilding of the
fractured nation.

To my initial surprise, most of the Rwandan people
with whom I worked closely were reluctant to discuss
their own experiences during the genocide. I met only
one young man, named Musoni, who was eager to
divulge his personal nightmare. He took me to his
parents’ grave, showed me where his mother was struck
down with a machete while his infant brother clung
to her back, and where his sister was flung into a deep
well with dozens of other bodies and left for dead.

The political climate in Rwanda today discourages
people from speaking about their memories of the
genocide, except in court where cases against
perpetrators are still being tried. The Rwandan
government recently prohibited usage of the words
“Hutu” and “Tutsi” in an effort to expedite the
country’s return to normalcy. Yet, visible tensions
still remain. Many survivors expressed concern that
testifying in court would jeopardize their safety.

After my return to Seattle, I resumed my work with
the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource
Center. One of my first projects was to locate Rwandans
living in the Seattle area and encourage them to join our
speakers bureau of genocide survivors. Yet, everyone I
talked to declined to participate, ostensibly because it
is still too difficult to speak. Fourteen years is not long
enough to dissolve pain, to “forgive and forget.” Yet 14
years has been enough time for genocide to occur again,
first in Bosnia and more recently in Darfur, Sudan. My
extensive research on Rwanda and my experiences
there enabled me to recognize the lasting impact of
genocide in every society, the profundity of trauma
and the relevance of these atrocities to our lives, as
human beings halfway across the world. Perhaps, most
importantly, I learned that genocide isn’t ancient history;
it is our history, and it is up to us to never forget.

For more information on this article, or others in this
series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust
Education Resource Center: www.wsherc.org or
info@wsherc.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Approximately 100,000 children still live in child-headed
households. What do you think it would feel like to be
a child having to raise younger brothers and sisters, finding
a job, shopping for groceries, cooking meals and paying
all the bills?

The article states that “the political climate in Rwanda
discourages people from speaking about their memories of
the genocide, except in court.” Do you think not speaking
about their experiences will help them heal? Why or why not?

Choose an article in today’s newspaper where people are
going through difficult times and share with your class.