

The Story Behind the Founding of the Post Genocide Education Fund (PGEF)

During the course of the summer of 2006, we (Dr. Samuel Totten, a genocide studies specialist based at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and Mr. Rafiki Ubaldo, a freelance journalist and independent researcher of genocide studies and a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide who currently resides in Stockholm, Sweden) criss-crossed large swaths of Rwanda as we carried out a research that delved into Rwandan citizens' perspective of the gacaca process. As we tramped up and down scores of dusty hillsides interviewing one survivor of the genocide after another, we kept coming across coming across bright and articulate young people who impressed us with their powerful insights. At the conclusion of such interviews, Totten would frequently ask such interviewees: "And so, are you a university student or a graduate of a university?" Repeatedly, we heard variations of such answers as:

- "No, because of the genocide I was never able to finish high school and because my parents were killed in the genocide, I must pay my own way in life and that is costly enough."
- "I was in college in 1994, but fled during the killing. My family lost everything and we are still...well, there is no money for me to continue."
- "While I am still in high school, I do not plan to go to university as my mother is too poor to even consider asking her for such assistance."

It dawned on Totten that there must be many young people in every post-genocide society (e.g., Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, East Timor) who are not only haunted by the horrors they were forced to witness but bereft of the funds needed to even begin, let alone complete, a university education. Totten shared such thoughts with Ubaldo, and before we knew it we were engaged in a lively discussion about the fact that far too often those who have survived genocide are forgotten about by the international community, especially as new crises arise, be they man-made (genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, civil wars, terrorism) or a result of nature (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes). Indeed, survivors of genocide are, more often than not, left in the ruins and devastation to fend for themselves. Due to being newly destitute, many are left without the means to carry on their past lives or to pursue an education that could possibly help them transform their lives in a way that would make them more satisfying and productive.

Ubaldo, sadly, knows the truth of the above for he and his family have lived it:

The chaos that ensued after the genocide was nearly overwhelming. Houses were destroyed, properties were occupied by Hutus, and many Tutsi families were displaced without any hope of returning to their villages. When we did return we had to rebuild our homes, replant our crops and deal with our sorrow. Some families were completely decimated by the genocidaires, others spent great amounts of time tending to the wounds—physical and mental—members of their families.

All of my mother's brothers living in Rwanda at the time of the genocide had been killed. Many left behind orphans to fend for themselves. Only two of my father's seven brothers survived. And my dearest aunt, the only sister my father had, was brutally murdered together with her three children.

She left behind one orphan who ended up living with her grandmother, who was, herself, traumatized as a result of having witnessed the murder of her daughter-in-law and who later died, succumbing to injuries as a result of a head wound incurred during the genocide. And yet, my direct family is one of those very few lucky families who survived with a large number of its members still alive.

Families were so overwhelmed with starting their lives over again and tending to those in need that they could not even start thinking about a decent burial to those family members killed and dumped in mass graves.

Many children were taken to orphanages following their rescue by Rwandan Patriotic Force soldiers in June 1994. Many were in terrible physical and psychological shape. Many had witnessed the brutal murder of both their mother and father and all of their brothers and sisters.

After the genocide, I had to travel to almost all orphanages that were in the eastern part of Rwanda in order to search for my cousin who was 3 or 4 years old by then. I identified a young boy who looked like my cousin, went back home to say I found Muhire but when I went back to the orphanage with another relative to formalize orphanage procedures and take the child back home, my relative told me the kid was not ours. "He looks exactly like your cousin, but he is not," he said. At the orphanage they told us that many people were unable to identify their children for the simple reason that the children's conditions had either improved or worsened, depending on the situation in which the child was rescued. The child I identified as my cousin was traumatized and crawled into the arms of

everyone who wanted to leave with him. And since I was the first one to identify him as my relative, he answered "yes" to all questions. I kept on searching for Muhire, but in vain. Eventually, he was discovered by other members of the family.

Some young people simply forgot about school, as they had to take care of themselves and, if they were lucky enough to have brothers and sisters who survived, then them as well. What that meant is that they had to find ways of feeding themselves and their siblings, locate a place to live, and so on and so forth. And while they may have sent their younger siblings to school, they were forced to forget their own dreams of attending school for they had now become, as a result of the genocide, "parents."

As for those who wished to go on to university, it was often not easy to do. In many some cases it was virtually impossible. Some, of course, got lucky and benefited from government scholarships, but even many of those could not afford to purchase proper clothes or pay for bus transport from their villages and towns to the university.

Totten knew that as much as he wanted to help each and every individual he had met in Rwanda that he could not do it alone. He was already putting a young survivor through National University of Rwanda, and while the costs Totten incurred were fairly inconsequential (\$1,500.00 a year to cover the costs of registration, tuition, and room and board), there was no way he could support more than two or three students a year.

Cognizant of the fact that there were hundreds and thousands of young people in need, the more Totten and Ubaldo talked, the clearer it became to them that they needed to reach out to a wider public to help as many genocide survivors as possible attain a university education. Thus, on July 26, 2006, sitting atop a dusty hillside in Rwanda overlooking a broad valley lush with banana plants rich farm land, where prisoners in pink uniforms (some of whom, no doubt, were in imprisoned for their actions during the genocide) were tilling the soil, we co-founded the Post Genocide Education Fund (PGEF). It was then and there that decided that the express purpose of PGEF would be *to provide funds to enable survivors of genocide, who have the desire and ability, to attain a university education within their own nations.*

While still in Rwanda, Totten and Ubaldo wrote up a draft statement of purpose, and began circulating it Rwanda among various officials who warmly welcomed the initiative. Upon their return home, the United States for Totten and Sweden for Ubaldo, they shared their vision and plans for PGEF with various colleagues, friends

and family members. The reaction to the concept of PGEF was met with such overwhelming enthusiasm that the co-founders sensed that they were on to something important, if not momentous.

Early on, it was decided that the PGEF had to be a nonprofit organization so that both individuals and organizations would be more inclined to make donations to PGEF. Totten and Ubaldo also agreed that it behooved them to establish an Advisory Board, one comprised of some of the most noted human rights and genocide scholars and activists across the globe. In devising their list of potential advisory board members, Totten and Ubaldo agreed that it was important to include a good number of the board members who had personally witnessed genocide up close and/or the difficulties faced by post-genocide societies. It was the co-founders sense that such individuals would have a greater appreciation regarding the dire need of survivors. PGEF's Advisory Board reflects the latter and is proud to have advisory board members from such diverse places as Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, and many who have worked in the latter areas as well as along the Chad/Sudan border and Darfur, Sudan.

When all is said and done, we deeply care about survivors of genocide. In part, that is due to the fact that we have seen the sad sight of orphans in orphanages with rudimentary facilities, and on the hills of Rwanda and in the refugee camps in Chad with little to nothing to do but eke out a meager existence. We hope—with the assistance of our Advisory Board, Patrons, and citizens from all across the globe—to help them young survivors become productive citizens as a result of obtaining a university degree so that they and their families can lead lives that are fruitful and satisfying.