

A Reconciliation

AS WE FORGIVE RWANDA INITIATIVE HELPS RESTORE A NATION'S HOPE

by Shelly Miller

Kelsey Walker and mission teammates sit interspersed among village locals under a thicket of banana trees. The air is dry and warm just outside the capital city of Rwanda as scantily clad children hand out bottles of grape and orange Fanta with toothy grins. Storytelling begins and tears pool in the corners of her eyes. She is sitting among victims and perpetrators of genocide, but instead of anger, the stories express deep love for one another. *How can this be?*

Kelsey, member of Church of the Resurrection in Washington, DC, spent a month in Rwanda volunteering with the As We Forgive Rwanda

Initiative (AWFRI) — a Rwandan-led effort to transform communities by inspiring a grassroots movement of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation nationwide. The stories give evidence of the initiative's fruitfulness.

AWFRI resulted from an overwhelming response to the Rwandan debut of the award-winning documentary film, *As We Forgive*. When filmmaker Laura Waters Hinson hosted a screening in Kigali to an audience of 5,000 in 2009, she never imagined it would spark a movement of hope throughout the entire country.

"We thought we were doing a three-month film tour to engage conversations about reconciliation and forgiveness, but what developed has gone way beyond that," explains Andrea McDaniel, Co-Founder and Executive Director of AWFRI.

In an unprecedented move by high-level leaders, Larua received permission to show the

film in every school, prison, church and village in Rwanda, with an invitation to launch a program to spread the message of reconciliation. The Living Together program is the centerpiece of AWFRI, intertwining film screening with biblical teaching from curriculum developed and

facilitated by local Rwandans, along with discussions to promote healing. Rwandan facilitators focus on engaging church leaders and youth in programs ranging from two hours to three days, hoping participants will replicate the process.

"Reconciliation efforts have been underway for many years by Rwandan

leaders. AWFRI is standing on the shoulders of trailblazers, like our Co-Founder Emmanuel Kwizera, to enhance what has been their mission all along," explains Andrea. "It is their story, their vision, their work, and we are privileged to be a part of it." The Living Together program has touched the lives of 35,000 Rwandans to date, and surveys reveal that 90 percent of those who participated in the programs now believe

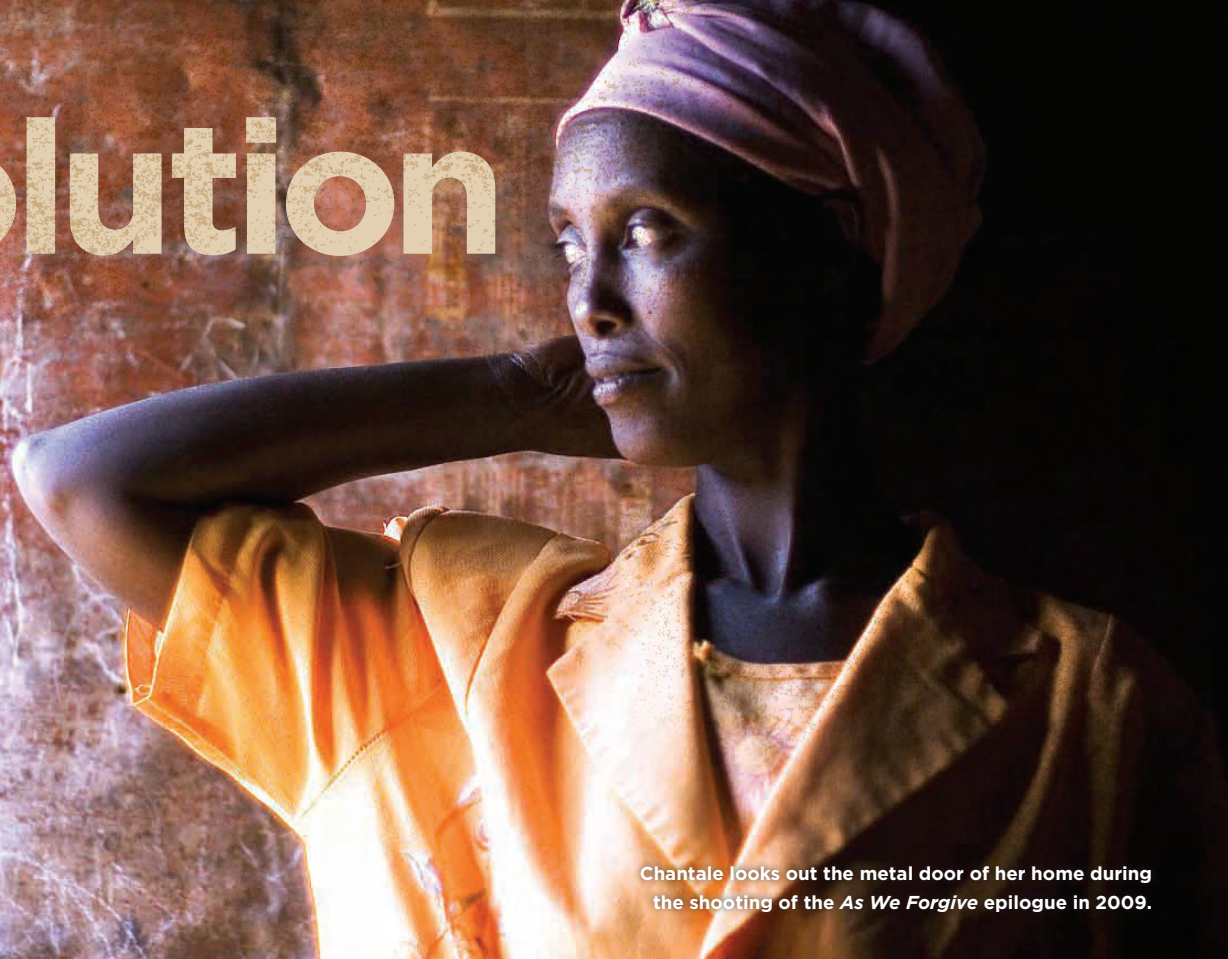


Laura Waters Hinson debuts her movie *As We Forgive* in Kigali, Rwanda, before an audience of 5,000.



Difficult to watch: Rwandan students at the *As We Forgive* screening.

Revolution



Chantale looks out the metal door of her home during the shooting of the *As We Forgive* epilogue in 2009.



John, a genocide perpetrator featured in *As We Forgive*.

“I have personally killed and was imprisoned for my crimes. Through the AWFRI program, I have decided that I want to find the one I offended and ask for forgiveness face-to-face.”

authentic reconciliation is truly possible for the first time since the genocide.

“I have personally killed and was imprisoned for my crimes. Through the AWFRI program, I have decided that I want to find the one I offended and ask him for forgiveness face-to-face,” says Pierre, a perpetrator.

“We create a safe public space where dialogue has not happened so people can come into the light and share honestly about division and the need for reconciliation,” explains Laura. “This is a critical moment for the youth culture of Rwanda — they have to decide if they will carry the mantle of division or reconciliation.”

Last April, AWFRI partnered with Walk to Remember, a movement empowering Rwandan youth to take action against genocide so that it never happens again. They joined President Paul Kagame to walk with 10,000 youth into Amahoro National Stadium for commemoration activities.



“One of the most impressive components of our screenings in schools is the hopeful attitude of the youth,” reports Kelsey. “At one school, a 14-year-old Muslim girl stood up to respond in the only phrase she could speak in broken English: ‘There is hope for our country.’ They are ready to reconcile and move on.”

For youth leaders and reformed street children, AWFRI helps facilitate a seven-week basketball camp called UBUMWE (“Unity”) from the end of February through the beginning of April. Because playing sports cultivates unity and teamwork among youth, basketball is the vehicle used to promote repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

While organized programs nurture the healing process around the country, team members of AWFRI find that community development goes hand in hand with sustainable reconciliation. Villages form associations to generate simple organic projects to apply what they have learned.

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The Freemans at the airport greeting Thierry Kim, a Rwandan student who lived with them last summer.

How can we explain such an unusual gathering without talking about the Kingdom of God?"

Two other couples with similar commitments have also moved into the Freemans' neighborhood, and together they are building relationships and doing organic incarnational ministry.



Making friends with international students at an International Friendship Outreach (IFO) picnic.

"Discipleship, evangelism, becoming community – it should be kind of hard to tell where one stops and another starts," notes Dustin. "This Christ-centered living is the goal we are stumbling toward."

The Freemans and St. Andrew's are changing lives with the love of Christ day-by-day, one individual and family at a time. And they start by simply loving their neighbors.

Shelly Miller contributed to this article.

A Reconciliation Revolution

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The truth of God's word at work to heal and reconcile.

Several villages have instituted cow and goat sharing, house and brick-building initiatives, community peace gardens and consolidating land to grow food.

Kelsey sits amidst one such association in the village of Kininya. One by one, young and old share about acts of hospitality among their neighbors, practicing the sacrament of presence and delivering food to an injured widow. Kelsey describes the moment as "experiencing a piece of heaven."

"Their simple gestures of hospitality brought great transformation in just six months," she remarks. "They seem like such a close-knit community, but for all we knew, they could have been a group of genocide victims. Perpetrators and victims with so much love between them – it brings tears of joy."

While the program has been incubating during the past year, evaluations show measured success on the ground in Rwanda, and neighboring countries have expressed interest in the program. Plans are underway to expand communication and fundraising efforts in the US, as well as the production of a new film by Laura and Andrea and expanded curriculum.



Renew DC mission team with the Kininya association.

To get involved with AWFR, contact Matt Haggerty at matt@asweforgive.org or (248) 207-4186. For information about financial contributions, visit www.asweforgive.org/donate. One hundred percent of donations support the work of the *As We Forgive Rwanda Initiative*.