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Rwandan children's rights advocate to speak at forum

When Abbotsford resident Jean De Dieu Hakizimana was a boy in Rwanda, he wanted to serve God. Instead, he ended up serving terrified children fleeing the genocide that gripped his country in 1994.

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When Abbotsford resident Jean De Dieu Hakizimana was a boy in Rwanda, he wanted to serve God.

Instead, he ended up serving terrified children fleeing the genocide that gripped his country in 1994.

After living through the slaughter of a million Rwandans, Hakizimana lost his will to serve God in a church.

He now serves his country through Neighbourhood Care International, an organization he founded to help orphaned children in Rwanda and other needy countries.

On Friday, he shares his story at a University College of the Fraser Valley forum on children and conflict in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Bosnia/Hertzegovina in the hopes of inspiring students to serve with him.

“The message to young people is they are active, they are educated, they have opportunity and freedom. They have the responsibility to make a difference,” said the 40-year-old UCFV B.A. student specializing in adult education.

The forum, part of a CIDA-funded series called Creating a Child-Friendly World, aims to “not simply outline the problem, but also outlining ways that people and especially students can get involved,” said series organizer Ahseea Ahmed.

“We are seeing more children and families from these countries coming to B.C. from conflict situations, and its very important to understand where they are coming from,” Ahmed said.

Hakizimana’s own story is inspiring. At 16, he left his home near Ruhengeri in northern Rwanda

for Tanzania to train for the priesthood at Philosophicum College in Kibosho.

“I wanted to be a priest, I wanted to serve people. That was my dream,” Hakizimana recalled.

He lost focus on his studies as the situation in Rwanda worsened in 1993 and residents started fleeing.

Hakizimana went to minister to the 250,000 refugees in Tanzania’s Benaco camp, at the time the largest refugee camp in the world.

He spent his days feeding and comforting children and visiting the countryside to pick up exhausted refugees struggling to get to the camp. While there, he heard his parents were killed. The fate of his three brothers and sisters is unknown.

“I saw the suffering of Rwandan children. I didn’t worry about my own family any more because it was a problem for everyone,” he said.

When the genocide ended and a new government took over, he went to Rwanda’s capital, Kigali, to help street kids living in the ruins.

“There was nobody in Rwanda,” he said. “The country was empty.”

He spent the next two years working with NGOs helping orphaned kids until he says he crossed the government (due to his funding and demands for policy changes) and was arrested, jailed and beaten.

It was only a Canadian aid worker, who eventually found and freed him after three days, that prevented him from disappearing. With her help, he fled to Canada as a political refugee. He landed in Calgary, moved to Walnut Grove in 1997 and then settled in Abbotsford.

Once he was safe, he started thinking of those left behind. He started NCI (www.neighborhoodcare.org). He has since served as a Canadian delegate at AIDS conferences in Uganda and Vancouver, and an ambassador for peace in New York. He has received a Vancouver Volunteer Award, and a Martin Luther King Peacemaker Award.

After completing his studies at UCFV, he plans to go back to Tanzania and continue his work.

“When I came here, my heart was in Rwanda,” he said. “I wanted to continue what I had been doing there. There was a need. Now I realize the problem [of abandoned children] is all over.”

- The Children in Conflict public forum runs Friday at UCFV’s Abbotsford campus, room B101, 2 to 5 p.m. The final March 8 forum features Stephen Lewis speaking at 8 p.m. Tickets for that event are \$15 adults and \$8 students and seniors.

Elaine O’Connor is in Rwanda and Mozambique this month reporting on B.C residents who are working for change in Africa. She is the recipient of a CIDA-Jack Webster Foundation Seeing

the World Through New Eyes Fellowship. Watch for her stories in The Province this spring.

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