

**Oral History in Africa: Giving Voice, Understanding Conflict and Promoting Peace  
- Davis Projects for Peace 2011**

“We must change our means of resolving conflict. To make peace, you need to talk more, not with your friends but with your enemies. This brought about actual miracles: Northern Ireland is quiet, France and Germany, with a thousand years of conflict, are now allies.”

Kathryn W. Davis,

“A Century of Learning, Loving, Laughing and Making New Friends”

“Two roads to peace could be named Goodness and Forgiveness. If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”

Nelson Mandela,

Peace activist, President, and  
International House Distinguished Visitor

Burundi, the world's poorest nation, is emerging from a 2004 peace process that ended near-constant civil war. Until Nelson Mandela brokered peace the conflict was one of Africa's most intractable, with more than half a million people killed in ethnic violence.

The country now faces the formidable task of forging national unity from those Hutu and Tutsi communities divided by conflict, fear and hatred, as peace-makers such as Nelson Mandela and the United Nations warn of the urgent need to foster national dialogue to secure a lasting peace.

We hope to contribute to this “miracle” of enduring peace through a Davis Project for Peace. Our proposal is to collect oral history to promote peace – to record stories and provide a voice to the millions of people who for years have remained the anonymous and silent victims of civil war.

Our understanding and aspirations for peace share the fullness of vision illuminated in the philosophy and practice of Kathryn W. Davis and Nelson Mandela. For us, as for Kathryn W. Davis, peace is predicated on “talking” and dialogue that fosters understanding and reconciliation. We also share Nelson Mandela’s faith in the peace-making imperatives of “goodness” and “forgiveness,” and his emphasis on productive, emancipatory “work” with a former enemy.

We have chosen oral history over other forms of journalism for cultural and peace-making reasons. Oral tradition is especially significant to Burundian culture and historical memory, and is the nation’s major source of historical record. Oral history is also a powerful tool for both personal and collective healing and reconciliation. For individuals who have been silenced through years of fear and violence, it provides a cathartic opportunity to tell stories, speak the truth, and build understanding. For communities, collection of such testimony establishes a historical record and a foundation for reconciliation. This collection also

fosters societal reflection on and recollection of violence and war, which is key to breaking down barriers which cause conflict.

This peace process is critical in Burundi, but we believe that our oral history project would also be of value in Africa and the United States. Africa as a region has been wracked with conflict for several decades, yet many of its now-peaceful nations share our faith in oral history as key to peace, from the emphasis of Nelson Mandela's ground-breaking Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to more recent oral history and story-sharing initiatives in more recent democratic African nations such as Malawi. In the United States and other developed countries that accept refugees, our stories would promote understanding of Burundi's history, and a wider comprehension of societies stricken by genocide and prolonged conflict. Our oral history would be available on a dedicated website which we would construct, and also promoted through our partnerships with U.S. and Burundi institutions and reputable peace-makers (see below). This would aid public understanding of prolonged conflict, and highlight the role of dialogue and reconciliation in building understanding, breaking down conflict, and promoting peace.

We have selected Burundi for several reasons. As a small nation of nine million people, and the poorest and least developed country in the world (as measured by GDP), Burundi lacks resources, as well as the international attention or recognition that can sometimes generate them. The fragility of Burundi's peace is a critical factor for us. After a lengthy conflict that consumed near 20 percent of its population, Burundi's tremulous yet courageous peace is an important moment to reflect, take lessons from one's past, and build an enduring peace.

We believe we are uniquely suited and well qualified to undertake this project. Both of us have considerable experience as professional journalists, and significantly covering conflict and human rights abuses in foreign countries. In addition, we have completed coursework on the techniques and ethics of oral history this year at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. We also have technical skills in website construction, are proficient in two of Burundi's main languages, and enjoy unique relationships with the world's most authoritative oral history institution, based at Columbia University, and a special partnership with the most respected peace-making group in Burundi.

Columbia University's Oral History Research Office has endorsed our project, and the Office's renowned Director Mary Marshall Clark has helped guide our planning. The Burundi-based Trauma Healing And Reconciliation Services (THARS), one of Africa's most respected post-conflict peacemaking organizations, has endorsed and aided our proposal. (see attached documentation) In addition, Burundi human rights expert Carolyn Keys has offered to share her experience and support.

Thank you for considering our proposal.

Duncan Wilson and Erika Fry  
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