

**Title: GITAGATA**

**School:** Bates College

**Student Information:**

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Rwanda: Mireille Ikirezi

### 1. Project Summary:

Four members of Bates Students for Peace in Rwanda, Catherine Zimmermann of Milton, MA, Brooke Miller of Anacortes, WA, Kate Harmsworth-Morrissey of Brookline, MA, and Mireille Ikirezi of Kigali, Rwanda traveled to Rwanda from June 27<sup>th</sup>-July 25<sup>th</sup> to implement our Project for Peace. We arrived in Rwanda with a general knowledge of Gitagata Center, the government-run home for street children. After speaking with Timothe Bizimungu, the director of Gitagata, however, we learned more specific information about the Center. Gitagata houses 678 boys ages 7-19, although the Center has a capacity for 800 boys. The younger children attend primary school in the morning. The rest of the day is unstructured except for meal times and an hour long discussion, concerning important life issues, lead by one of the three staff members every afternoon. Some of the important life issues discussed during our visits to the Center included the strengths of Rwanda, the post-genocidal justice system established in Rwanda, and what defines a good citizen. Bizimungu also informed us that the Rwandan government forbids the use of cameras at the Gitagata Center for fear that this government-run operation will be presented to foreigners negatively. This meant we needed to revise our original proposal involving a photography-based reconciliation project.

We therefore set up several meetings with well-established peace-building organizations to gain further insight into how we could use our services to help the children of Gitagata now and in the future. The three organizations we met with included the following: the Rwandan chapter of Never Again, an international association for maintaining peace; Ihorere, an association partly funded by the US embassy that teaches street children to make artisan crafts to sell; and Tubeho, an organization providing housing for orphans of the genocide. We also met several survivors of the genocide within the Tubeho community with whom we e-mailed last semester as part of our French seminar at Bates College on the Rwandan Genocide. This series of meetings provided us with valuable information, helping us to devise our own craft-based project at Gitagata Center. Our newly defined long-term goal involves having the children make straw baskets and other craft goods that we can sell in the United States, which will provide further funding for the Center.

## **2. Project Results:**

We successfully established a relationship with Gitagata Center during our one-month stay in Rwanda, which set in motion our primary goal of developing a sustainable project. Although the photography-based reconciliation project was infeasible, we achieved our goal of finding a way to help the center in the long-term. During the children's free time, we provided art supplies that they used to create drawings that we hope to put on cards and sell in the United States. The profits from the cards will go directly to the Center for facility maintenance and the purchase of medicine, books, and other supplies. This is the first step we took in implementing an arts and crafts project. We hope that this project will grow in scale (i.e. involve larger craft items such as baskets and bags that require further resources we need more time to obtain).

We collected accounts from the children detailing their personal histories and their hopes for the future. We plan to share these accounts in hopes of raising awareness on campus through Bates Students for Peace in Rwanda. At the end of our stay, we donated money to Gitagata Center in order to help the Center meet its pressing financial needs.

## **3. Implications:**

Our belief that peace is a harmony of people and interests in the pursuit of wellbeing is clearly shared by Gitagata Center. We agree that maintaining peace in Rwanda depends on the children of today. The Center provides street children who are suffering directly or indirectly from genocide a positive outlook by providing them with education. Children who otherwise see no hope for the future learn that they have a powerful role in shaping their country. Education allows these children to pursue better lives for themselves, in turn becoming productive members of society. Our financial and personal support of Gitagata Center is helping to promote our common goal of fostering peace in a post-genocidal nation.

In the future, we hope to establish a larger-scale crafts project that will continue to finance Gitagata Center's needs. Additionally, we intend to host clothing drives on the Bates campus and in other community settings in order to provide further assistance to the street children (one of the most immediate concerns for the Center is providing footwear for the children). The Bates Students for Peace in Rwanda will continue to raise awareness about genocide and its implications at Bates College and hopefully establish a larger network of support for the Center. Informing more people about the lives of these children will demonstrate to the children that they can contribute to the rebuilding of a stable and peaceful state. With our help, the children of Gitagata Center will see that they can pursue better lives for themselves, lives that are not defined by violence and genocide.



(1) Nyamata Church Genocide Memorial, which is located in the Bugesera Region. Gitagata Center is also found in this region.



(2) Youth of the Ihorere Organization working on baskets to sell.



(3) Mireille Ikirezi, Catherine Zimmermann, Brooke Miller, and Kate Harmsworth-Morrissey with members of the Tubeho community.