

SUMMARY:

We humanize the prison experience for Rwandan youth in this intervention that seeks to foster various forms of resilience in children of incarcerated parents (CIPs) by generating new opportunities for familial connection, social support and community building. We partner with Prison Fellowship Rwanda on a platform of restorative justice for genocidal rehabilitation. Our initiative helps ease the trauma experienced by children in families ruptured by imprisonment through a self-sustaining program that will strengthen relationships between children and their incarcerated parents, aiding positive integration of these parents into society through restorative justice practices. One-on-one and group interventions will empower CIPs with emotionally cathartic coping methods: journaling, support groups, and letter writing will help children gain healthy situational understanding, establish self-support networks, and potentially reconnect with imprisoned parents. Furthermore, we engage in ethnographic documentation of Rwandan CIPs, beginning to capture and interpret their unique narratives, and what they mean for peacemaking in a post-genocidal society. Our three integrated initiatives develop sustainable networks and resources: a CIP Workshop, a Letter Writing Program and a Resource Guide/Coping Kit.

CIPs: The Forgotten Victims

The psychosocial and economic burden endured by CIPs is overlooked at every stage of the criminal justice process. These children silently serve unofficial sentences; as one researcher described, “every time a parent is sentenced to prison, children begin serving time alongside them. Their punishment is to be wrapped in feelings of shame and worthlessness, to wonder if a similar fate is in store for them, to live with the anger, hurt, worry and grief of losing and blaming a loved one” (1). Recently the UN hosted its Day of General Discussion on Children of Incarcerated Parents, establishing CIPs as a distinct and uniquely marginalized at-risk group and confirming insufficient global awareness of the traumatic loneliness, grief, and social isolation experienced by CIPs.

Restorative Justice: Our Peace-Seeking Process

Imprisonment is an especially salient socio-political problem in Rwanda. The country, currently ranking 7th worldwide for imprisoned population, is tangled in a complex recovery process from the 1994 genocide. Initiatives based on restorative justice strive to ameliorate this aftermath of war-torn vengeance and the appended cycle of incarceration. Achieving a peaceful society demands successful criminal reconciliation: healing broken relationships, repairing the damage done by crime, and restoring imprisoned offenders to productive members of society upon release. Working towards these ends, organizations commonly focus on relationships between genocidal victims and criminal perpetrators. This system leaves forgotten victims: the children of prisoners are collaterally damaged, devastated by the changes in their families as the parent leaves or rejoins it. Rwandan CIPs are therefore an acute affliction to restoration, a critical missing link in national reunification, and vital to the peace-seeking process. Responding to the needs of these children is vital in order to fully ameliorate genocidal injury.

Prison Fellowship Rwanda: The Affiliation

Prison Fellowship Rwanda, a national non-profit organization chartered in 1997, stems from Prison Fellowship International (PFI). PFI is a UN funded NGO that employs restorative justice techniques to aid prisoners, ex-prisoners, victims, and their families. PF Rwanda, directed by Pastor Deo Gashagaza, seeks “restoration, reconciliation, and rehabilitation” of injured communities through prison ministry and supportive services, providing food and education to inmates and their families. PF Rwanda staff and volunteers feed 85 children 3 times a week and provide supplies such as shoes and clothing, and services such as counseling and group activities (2). PF Rwanda lacks programming that specifically targets the many children impacted by parental imprisonment; our program is both a unique and necessary contribution to PF Rwanda’s mission and will be self-sustainable. This initiative will continue to promote peaceful reconciliation among CIPs, incarcerated parents, and community long after our eight weeks in Rwanda.

Project Implementation: The Plan

Initiative 1: Facilitate CIP Workshops

We will set up workshops that connect CIPs with one another, with Prison Fellowship volunteers, and with us. These discussion-based sessions, developed in collaboration with PF Rwanda staff, will allow CIPs to share their

(1) Burgess, Caselman, Carsey. 2009. Empowering Children of Incarcerated Parents. Youthlight Inc.

(2) Prison Fellowship International: restorativejustice.org/university-classroom/02world/africa3/africa/Rwanda

experiences in a safe place and provide us with a platform to develop our Resource Guide (Initiative 3), and to set up our Letter Writing Program and distribute our Coping Kits (Initiative 2).

Workshops for CIPs will include activities that have shown success in U.S. programs (1), which we will adapt for Rwandan CIP's. We will focus on practicing coping skills that address mental health along with journaling and creative writing exercises and other restorative justice-based interventions. Workshops will allow children to create friendships with peers who face similar challenges. The networks formed through these groups will work to reduce the shame often felt by CIPs and discussions will foster open dialogue. Groups will be divided by age, with CIPs aged 10 and under in one group and those over 10 in a different group.

Initiative 2: Develop Letter Writing Program and Coping Kits

We will launch a Letter Writing Program for incarcerated parents and CIPs that promotes familial dialogue, reconciliation, and re-adjustment (3). Letter-writing templates and materials (provided in the Coping Kits) will assist children with the difficult and often intimidating task of writing to their parent after a long period of absence. Children will have the opportunity to enclose images of themselves with their letters. We will purchase a digital camera, computer, and a printer for PF Rwanda for continued use.

We have created Coping Kits to distribute to workshop participants. Each kit includes a journal for reflection and creative writing, letter writing materials (such as stamps, envelopes, stationary, and letter templates) and photocopies of picture books about CIPs. These resources, available in English, French and Kinyarwanda, serve to emphasize the fact that CIPs are not alone.

Initiative 3: Create a Resource Guide for Rwandan CIPs

We will work towards the development of a culturally adapted Resource Guide for Rwandan CIPs. We will finalize this document on site to put into the Coping Kits that we leave for future CIPs. This guide globalizes the CIP experience, addressing intimate accounts that color the unique experiences of Rwandan CIPs and draws out the tense discourses that surround genocidal imprisonment. We will gain approval to engage in ethically practiced ethnographic research and will fill the guide with FAQs (about visiting prisons, legal concerns, counseling services, and mental health), creative writing excerpts, and narratives. We have already collected a wealth of external resources such as books and reports that will contribute to the Resource Guide, which is largely based on a similar US manual (4).

Program Sustainability:

Through the Workshop process we hope to cultivate a network of individuals dedicated to our program. We allot a portion of our grant funds towards program sustainability. These funds will go towards technological supplies that we will donate to PF Rwanda, as well as printing costs for materials in the Coping Kits. Additionally, we will train PF staff and other volunteers to carry out workshops after we have left.

Personal Qualifications: About Us

Devin Tatro grew up with a parent in the United States Federal Prison system and received familial assistance from Prison Fellowship International. She overcame complicated feelings of intense grief, guilt, isolation and shame characteristic of CIPs. During long hours visiting her father, Tatro and her siblings snuck scotch tape, lined on the inside of their jackets, into the bleak and hopeless visitors' basement in order to repair the few books that sat in the neglected children's corner. An anthropology major, Tatro studied Development abroad and visited Rwanda in the fall of 2012 where she got hands-on experience in conflict resolution methods at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Rwanda Development Board.

Simone Schriger worked with CIPs at Camp Harmony, a free program for impoverished children in Los Angeles. Simone lives her passion for restorative justice as a Research Assistant in the Bates Psychology Department and as the student co-chair of the disciplinary committee at Bates College. Currently teaming with an administrative board to revise the College Code of Conduct, she believes that restorative justice methods are imperative to empowering broken relationships. Simone spent the winter of 2013 in the south of Chile, where, through a Middlebury program, she directly enrolled in a local university and volunteered at a free health clinic. She received Mellon and Barlow grants that allowed her to conduct independent research for her senior Honors Thesis in psychology studying perceptions of dating violence.

(3) Adalist-Estrin, Ann. 2008. Children of The Incarcerated: Promising Strategies.

(4) Project What. 2008. Resource Guide for Teens with A Parent in Prison or Jail.