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Column: Lessons from Rwanda

Three Ann Arbor couples learn while they teach in Africa

By [Patricia Pasick](#)

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Fly on the wall at Detroit Metro airport: Lots of Ann Arbor area residents travel to exotic places. Smack dab from the middle of America, we long for a change of scenery, and Midwesterners are friendly types.

But Rwanda?

In 2007-2008, three local couples, well into their careers, traveled to the heart of Africa, landing in a country about half the size of Michigan. For differing missions, David and Valerie Canter, Andrea Sankar and Mark Luborsky, and myself and Rob Pasick stepped onto the warm black tarmac of modern Kigali airport, and began to work.

Over weeks and months, all of us trained people: doctors, officials, teachers, students, and researchers. In return, Rwanda trained us. We quickly learned things like how to make small talk before big talk, how to do the three-kiss greeting, and how to establish trust before asking personal questions.

As Ann Arbor couples, we Linked/In, in real time. Rob and I happened upon Andrea and Mark on a hotel patio: “You’re from WHERE!?!?” The Canters hosted me in their apartment on a recent three-week trip. We all returned to Ann Arbor profoundly changed by our experiences in this tiny sub-Saharan nation. I interviewed all of us recently, for this column.

But, wait, what about the genocide?

True, over one million died horribly at the hands of Hutu extremists in the 1994 anti-Tutsi genocide. Memorials are everywhere, and programs that promote “never again.” But it’s not true that Rwanda is dangerous. Rwanda has less political and street crime than any other African nation. By 1996, the government was on a fast-track to internal security, justice for victims, economic development, and good governance. Recent problems at the western border have not spilled across Rwanda’s borders.

Veteran Africa travelers are stunned at how modern, clean, stable, safe, and gleaming they find Kigali, the capital. Heads up, Ann Arbor: Once a month (*Umuganda*), six million adults stop what they’re doing, and work on infrastructure within their communities – cleaning, repairing, planting, weeding, and building.

The two major ethnic groups, Hutus and Tutsis, now live and work side by side, as citizens of one nation, not as tribes. Reconciliation there – anywhere – is not easy. Tensions are obvious to Rwandans (not us). But the government’s many creative attempts at ethnic unity (e.g. *Umuganda*) have been effective. (Full disclosure: all six of us have become unpaid Rwandan good-will ambassadors.)



David and Valerie Canter, in Rwanda.

In 2008 Valerie and David Canter lived six months in Rwanda. Valerie, now teaching high school classes at Eastern Michigan University's Early Alliance program on the campus of EMU, taught English literature at a private secondary school in Rwanda – oddly enough, called Greenhills. She also worked at a public school for girls, called FAWE.

Working abroad is a fluid experience. Valerie reports: “Sure, I taught my subject matter. But I connected more substantially by teaching critical thinking skills. The students were used to reciting facts, not expressing and defending their opinions.”

Back in Ann Arbor, Valerie has struggled, like all of us, to reconcile the vast plentitudes in the U.S. with the stark poverty in Rwanda. She's concluded that “there's nothing wrong with having what you have, but it's what you do with those things that matter.” Most primary school students are issued one pencil - for the year. She recounted how she and David reused pieces of tin foil the bakery used to package bread, “at least 20 times” before it finally fell apart.

Her husband, David Canter – a doctor, researcher and former head of Pfizer's Ann Arbor research labs – worked with the Access Project out of Columbia University. His original mission was to help the Access Project staff more effectively manage the small medical centers that dot the rural landscape.

Instead, he says, “I helped them develop a model for evaluating whether or not the centers were being effective.” And since only 500 doctors serve 10 million people, well-run centers are critical.

“How does this tiny nation make so much, of so little? Rwanda delivers very basic health care to its 10 million citizens for an insurance cost of two dollars per person per year!” David's stay in Rwanda re-focused his own career. Now at the University of Michigan's William Davidson Institute, his work centers on refining business models of health care in the developing world.

Working in post-conflict nations is always an up-close experience, and quickly becomes personal. David continues: “The genocide became personal for us when Pat Pasick, Valerie and I accompanied a Rwandan friend, Celestin, to a village where his sister was murdered. Villagers at one of Rwanda's 10,000 local justice courts, called *gacaca*, knew where she might be buried. We saw Glordia's newly dug remains laid into a casket, then visited the pit toilet hole where she was dumped. In the crowd that followed us to the site, we met the man who very probably helped kill her, in 1994.”



Rob Pasick leads a leadership workshop in Rwanda.

Rob Pasick – founder of LeadersConnect, an executive coach, and organizational psychologist – went to Rwanda for the William Davidson Institute at U-M’s Business School. His mission was to train Rwanda’s top 100 government officials in leadership skills, in three trips to the nation. On Day One, he got a loud and clear wake-up call. Training here would be really different.

“We started 4 hours late, which is customary,” Rob notes. “The training was kicked off by a speech from a Minister accompanied by several Uzi-armed soldiers who stood watch outside the conference room door.”

“Very quickly, though, I felt very much a part of the government’s mission. Leadership groups are very bound to each other, at the personal level. After two separate, exhausting day-long sessions, one group swept me up to attend a funeral, and another to visit a man’s wife in a hospital where she had just miscarried. That’s the level of care they have for one another. I learned a lot from them about work-life balance.”

Like the Canters, Rob’s work morphed quickly into a larger project. “I saw quickly that training second-tier leaders, like Secretary Generals, wouldn’t be effective unless we also trained *their* bosses (Ministers, including the Prime Minister).”



Patricia Pasick with her in-country director, Evas.

As a psychologist and writer, using my skills in Rwanda was a no-brainer. Showing up takes you much of the way. A contact, a phone call and a school visit is all it took to set up a pen pal project with some local schools (Pattengill in Ann Arbor, University Preparatory School in Detroit, and Ida Community Schools). I consulted to several schools about special needs kids, and drafted a book based on the personal stories of men and women leaders who established the current government.

Then, a meeting with a Secretary General set in motion a government-sponsored program to bring a version of StoryCorps to Rwanda. The project – Stories For Hope-Rwanda – will collect and record family and cultural stories between elders and young people. Untold stories abound in Rwanda, and I’m aiming to write, record, and publish as many as I can. A sixth trip is planned in 2009.

Andrea Sankar and Mark Luborsky are medical anthropologists at Wayne State University, where Andrea is also the chairperson of the anthropology department. They made three trips to Rwanda for Family Health Alliance, an organization dedicated to improving and enhancing the health of women and families in resource-poor environments.



Mark Luborsky and Andrea Sankar with their team in Rwanda.

“Our mission was vague, to develop a HIV/AIDS program for people already diagnosed with the virus, and train local Rwandese to conduct interviews about why people follow or don’t follow their drug regimens.”

Andrea continues: “In retrospect, the training of locals to conduct life stories was the most important thing we did. The Health Ministry now has an additional research tool.”

One of her lasting impressions was the Rwandese dedication to making things work, even in terrible poverty. “I saw such pride, purpose and dignity in the midst of impoverished conditions, like the absence of clean running water, or electricity. And the commitment to rebuilding the nation is incredible.”

Andrea tells the story of their co-worker, Emmanuel, who adopted four orphans after the genocide, adding them to the six he already had. “He’s a church leader, and weekend graduate student in nutrition. His mission is not to better himself, but the nation.”

“That’s another take-away for me after three trips to Rwanda. Leadership matters. Seeing such strong leaders in Rwanda rekindles my optimism in the U.S., with the coming new set of leaders.”

Back in Ann Arbor, in these discomfiting months of economic turmoil, we all agree that Rwanda has much to teach the West about leadership, determination, equality, conflict-resolution, and getting through hard times. For Rwandans, it’s all about hard work and hope. Why not for Americans?

About the author: Patricia Pasick is a psychologist and writer who lives in Ann Arbor.