

A Survivor's Story

Losing her mother, a sister and three brothers in the 1994 Rwandan genocide forever changed Béa Gallimore. Once content to write books and teach French, the MU professor has found a new mission: transforming the lives of countless Rwandan women and dozens of Mizzou students through her work.

STORY BY ERIK POTTER ✨ PHOTO BY NICHOLAS BENNER

Béa Gallimore sits on her hotel bed in Quebec City April 15, 1994, to answer the phone. She's dressed for her morning presentation on Francophone African fiction at a conference of the Council of International Francophone Studies. Then an MU assistant professor of Romance Languages, she has just landed a large grant and an 18-month sabbatical to write a book — her ticket to tenure — about violence against women in French-language fiction by female African writers. She is full of excitement, full of purpose.

But life suddenly changes when Gallimore puts the phone to her ear and hears her cousin in Paris tell her that her mother, sister and three brothers are all dead.

Time and memory begin to blur.

The killings in Rwanda started nine days before, but they were never supposed to have

escalated so rapidly. They were never supposed to have ensnared Gallimore's family there — three brothers and two sisters — who'd shunned politics precisely to avoid becoming targets for violence. Gallimore had talked to her sister the night before and knew that she and her mom, who was visiting from Congo, were in danger. But her sister had still been in good spirits. Gallimore had been hopeful they'd survive.

Knowing they are dead while she sits a world away in a safe hotel room fills her with guilt and despair.

As Gallimore tells her story later, sitting in her small book-stuffed office in the Arts and Science Building, her voice, lilting sweetly with a French and African accent, drops low. She does not cry, but her words slow. She puts them out tenderly. Nearly 20 years later, the words still hurt.



I WANT TO SPEAK

Looking back, the road to genocide seems almost inexorable. Rwanda was a Belgian colony from 1919 until independence in 1962 and a German colony before that. During that time, colonialists judged the minority Tutsi ethnic group as superior to the majority Hutus because of their taller statures and more aristocratic appearance by European standards. Tutsis were favored with access to education, which led to better jobs, and were made partners in colonial administration. “A very dangerous social bomb was almost absentmindedly manufactured throughout the peaceful years of [colonial] domination,” writes Gerard Prunier in *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Columbia University Press, 1995).

Decades of pent-up economic, political and ethnic tension erupted in 1959 with a Hutu-led rebellion, which ultimately won Rwandan independence but also resulted in the killing of 30,000 Tutsis between 1959–66 and the exile of at least 336,000 more by 1964. Among those exiled was Gallimore’s family, who fled to neighboring Congo in stages beginning in 1966 when Gallimore was a young teen. She left with two of her siblings and her father. Seven more siblings and her mother followed in 1968, but her three oldest siblings remained in their jobs in Rwanda to support the family in its exile. When Congo’s economy deteriorated in the late 1980s, two of her siblings there returned to Rwanda.

Leading up to 1994, Gallimore had seen the injustices her siblings in Rwanda faced but hadn’t gotten involved or tried to do anything about it. Meddling in politics would only place them at risk, she had reasoned.

But her caution didn’t save them, and when local reporters in Columbia call her after she returns home from Quebec City to ask her about losing her family — before the world is willing to admit they were victims of genocide — she doesn’t hesitate.

“My whole life I kept silent so that nobody would get killed,” she remembers thinking. “Now I don’t have anything to lose. I want to speak.”

DEATH IS FOR EVERYBODY STEP UP

Gallimore and her husband, Tim, then an assistant professor in the School of Journalism, speak out for two months — to the media, to U.S. senators, to the Red Cross, to anyone who would listen. But she is no closer to finding the remains of her family who died or bringing home those who have survived. She is disconsolate. She breaks down crying in the middle of dinner. She is unable to focus.

She has to go.

In June 1994, despite her husband’s objections, Gallimore flies to Uganda. At the mountainous Rwandan border, she tries unsuccessfully to get information from the U.N. about the status of the asylum applications she’d made for her family. She receives an underground message from her other sister who lives in Rwanda saying that she is in Kigali, Rwanda’s capital, and asking Gallimore to come find her. A Tutsi-led rebel army overtakes Kigali July 4, and days later Gallimore and a cousin join an army convoy headed to the capital to look for her.

She will never forget that stretch of road: the stench of rotting, machete-mangled bodies, the grenades and land mines strewn along the roadsides, the injured and displaced people huddled in makeshift clinics, desperate for bread and water. By the time Gallimore reaches Kigali, she’s given away the carload of food and medicine she brought for her sister. All that’s left is a bottle of water and a jar of jam.

She hasn’t seen the capital since childhood, and she doesn’t know where to begin searching. At a gas station, Gallimore asks the first man she sees, a Muslim in white robes. As she approaches, she realizes she knows him. He used to rent a house to her sister. At first he turns away from her, unwilling to give her bad news. “Listen,” she calls out. “I know [my family] was killed. But I want to know about Carrie. Is she still alive?”

“Yes, she’s still alive, and I know where she is,” he says.

Gallimore’s sister had survived, along with many other Tutsis, by hiding in a secret compound in the Biryogo neighborhood on Kigali’s west side.

Reunited, the sisters embrace and scream for joy — and then for grief for their mother and siblings. But the other survivors reprimand them. “When we started shouting and crying, the people told us, ‘Stop it. Death is for everybody. At least you have each other,’” Gallimore remembers.

Those would be the words that push her to create the nonprofit Step Up.

→ Piles of clothes from genocide victims fill the pews of a church in Nyamata, Rwanda, as a memorial to those murdered there April 10, 1994. The church is one of many memorials of the 1994 genocide that killed an estimated 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Tutsis were lured into churches with the promise of protection from the militias only to be slaughtered. Photojournalism master’s student Joshua Boucher took this photo June 11, 2013, while visiting the site as part of a study-abroad trip with Associate Professor of Romance Languages Béa Gallimore.



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of them bearing children.

The genocide leaves no one unaffected, certainly not Gallimore. Although she returns to her job, finishes her book and earns tenure, she can't go back to researching French-language fiction, partly because she's angry at France for arming the Hutu government and not protecting her murdered sister, who worked at the French embassy, and partly because fiction has lost all meaning for her in the face of the reality she's experienced. For nearly a decade she struggles to heal and to find a new purpose in her work.

Eventually Gallimore starts contributing her thoughts on grieving — and Rwandans' reticence toward it — to a website for the Rwandan diaspora. It leads to a 2003 invitation to speak at a Rwandan conference on war and conflict in East-Central Africa. She hasn't been back to Rwanda since 1994 and doesn't want to visit again. Her mother had been merely visiting when the genocide broke out, but that didn't save her. Gallimore relents only when conference organizers promise they would put her on a plane at the first sign of trouble.

Organizers book her in the Hotel Des Milles Collines in Kigali, made famous by the 2004 movie *Hotel Rwanda*. Being back home triggers an intense physiological reaction. Where other hotel guests see the Hotel Des Milles Collines' beautiful landscaping and architecture, Gallimore sees the

littered bodies of 1994. She smells them decomposing. She hears the phone from her Quebec City hotel room ringing in her ears. The memories make her literally sick to her stomach. She can't sleep. "I had lots of problems at that hotel," she says.

At the end of the conference, she is taken to a local nongovernmental organization of genocide survivors. She speaks with women survivors of genocide for her book research, but at the end of the interview, a woman says, "So you publish your books and then what?" Gallimore remembers. "We are not going to eat books. We're not going to get medication against AIDS [from a book]."

Gallimore can't give the woman a satisfactory answer. A well-written academic tome won't improve the life of this woman or her family.

"That's the way Step Up was born," Gallimore says.

The original vision is small: a safe, comfortable house where women can share tea and grieve without judgment. "That's what my mom would have done," she says.

What she builds, however, is much bigger.

Drawing on therapist training she had received in 1994 from MU Professor of Child Psychology and Child Health Syed Arshad Husain,



ernment aid for college. Step Up has sought sponsors for \$1,000 scholarships that pay for a year of schooling.

But its biggest project is the construction of a new counseling center, House of Hope, where would-be counselors can be housed and trained. So far, \$35,000 of the needed \$150,000 has been raised.

The need for trauma counseling remains. “This is a new generation that has been living in silence,” Gallimore says. “Whether Hutu or Tutsi, they are living side by side with memory sites, reminders, the month of remembrance. They’re recalling, some of them, the legacy of genocide, knowing their grandparents were killed during the genocide. But there’s no forum to discuss all those issues.”

↑ A Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre trainee shares his experience after participating in a workshop on gender-based violence June 27, 2013, in Rwanda’s Kamonyi district. Boucher, who did a two-week internship with the center chronicling their outreach services during his study-abroad trip with Gallimore, made this photo during a site visit.

MS ’68, PhD ’71, Gallimore crafts with his help a trauma counseling training program modeled after one he created to help Bosnians heal after the Bosnian genocide in the early 1990s. Mental health professionals from Mizzou, and later from across the country, fly to Rwanda to train community leaders there — pastors, teachers, nurses — on how to counsel people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Step Up’s assistance becomes more tangible in 2006 when Gallimore meets members of Abasa, a group of female rape victims speaking out about their experiences. “We are traumatized when we cannot feed our children, when we cannot buy uniforms for our children, when we cannot pay their schools,” she remembers them telling her. Step Up adopts the association and starts doing economic projects, giving the women cloth and a storefront where they can make and sell school uniforms for a profit, giving them 38 milk cows and grass seed for grazing, hiring an agricultural researcher to teach them beekeeping, and giving them microloans so the women can start small-scale entrepreneurial efforts.

Nearly 20 years later, the legacy of the genocide lives on as the children born from the 1994 rapes come of age and demand the truth from their mothers, some of whom have lied to their children about how they were violently conceived. The youngest women assaulted during the genocide are only now young adults — the youngest member of Abasa was 7 when she was raped. Because of trauma, Gallimore says, many did not perform well in school, which disqualifies them for gov-

STUDY ABROAD

During her work in Rwanda, Gallimore becomes involved with a group of Rwandan academics in the U.S. who want to set up a study-abroad program for performing arts students. It sparks an idea in Gallimore to create an academic-focused program at Mizzou where students can learn about the genocide.

In 2009, the first group of students makes the four-week summer trip to Rwanda. They spend two weeks in classes, listen to guest speakers and visit memorial sites. Then they spend two weeks in internships working in local schools, hospitals, social service agencies and other places relevant to their majors.

Dan Kordenbrock, BA ’10, JD ’12, of Columbia makes the trip in 2010. He had already completed a three-week study-abroad program in Ghana. “I thought I knew everything,” he says. “[But Rwanda] was far different from what I had seen in Ghana.”

Kordenbrock is struck by the readiness of the Rwandan people to talk about things that are personal and uncomfortable.

“Survivors would speak with us, American kids who come over and don’t know that much — we can’t even grasp the [basics] at that time,” he says. “I didn’t know what to make of it.”

Joshua Boucher, a master’s student in photojournalism from Minneapolis, goes on the 2013 trip. He is surprised by the “radical honesty” of a reconciliation village where survivors and perpetrators of genocide live together.

A man who tells him he was imprisoned nine

'The things we experienced you don't talk about in polite conversation.'

years for killing an entire family makes a particular impression. "Just looking into his face about this, it was completely unreal, his expression," Boucher says. "How many people

have you encountered who will just tell you about the family they have killed? It was an absolutely mind-boggling experience, that one moment right there. It was traumatic to even encounter that."

The daily scenes of hardship students witness during their internships can also be difficult. Although Rwanda's streets are relatively safe and there are plenty of upscale areas, there is also a lot of poverty.

During the 2013 trip, Jordan Morrissey, a senior in biology and French from St. Louis, interns in the main hospital in Kigali. A volunteer at University Hospital, Morrissey has trouble squaring the conditions she sees in Kigali with what she sees in Columbia.

One patient who was about her age still sticks in her mind. He had blood pouring out of his mouth and nose. He was intubated, but the tubes were filling with his thinning blood. He was unresponsive. They couldn't contact his parents because they couldn't find his paper chart. They have no electronic records. He at least had a room and a bed, unlike the patients who regularly line the hallways.

Even more sobering to Morrissey is that the hospital is the referral hospital for the entire area. Conditions there are "as good as it got," she says.

NO LONGER THE SAME

The students — usually a group of about 10 — grow very close to Gallimore during the course of their trips and look to her to help them process their emotions. During their weeks of preparation leading up to departure, she insists that they call her by her first name. "We don't have time to go through formalities when we are there," she tells them. "If you are hurting, remember, I am your friend. I am Béa."

Coming home can be difficult as well, as students bear a heavy burden from what they've seen, and many feel the need to talk about it and act on it.

"You don't know how to tell your family about how you felt," says Anna Burris, of Lathrop, Mo., a senior in international studies and political science. "The things we experienced you don't talk about in polite conversation."

That's why Kordenbrock, after that first trip, started reaching out to the Rwandan refugee community in Columbia and offering to tutor

their children. By fall 2010, he formalized his volunteerism by forming a student organization, Step Up Mizzou, which many students join after they return from Rwanda. The group focuses on tutoring and speaking out on

issues of refugees and genocide.

Kordenbrock's Rwanda experience changed his career path, cementing his desire to earn a law degree and work with refugees or immigrants in America or internationally. Gallimore says many of her students have had similar transformations.

"Many parents have called me or sent me an email, 'Our son, our daughter, is no longer the same since she went with you to Rwanda,'" she says. In her previous courses, "despite my teaching on grammar and a lot of marks on [French papers], I never got those phone calls."

Gallimore is on research sabbatical for the 2013–14 academic year to work in Rwanda. She plans to continue to lead Step Up and the study-abroad program and to teach French.

"If I were rich, I'd retire now and devote more time to this, teaching this course and working on this [nonprofit]," she says. "It's maybe the best thing I ever did in my life."

And it might have saved her life in a way. Although she had a husband and children of her own at home in Columbia, she felt she'd lost everything after her family was killed. Finding herself again in the midst of that grief took years.

"The healing comes in different ways," Gallimore says. "Maybe that's my way of healing — being engaged in action. I don't think I'd have survived if I'd stayed in my office and continued to write on fiction." **M**



↑ Students at the GS Ngarama school in Rwanda's Rulindo district take a break between classes June 19, 2013. Boucher accompanied Dominique Niyibizi, a volunteer external trainer for the Men's Resource Centre, to a training program for high school students on gender-based violence.