



SUCCESS STORY

Heroes Showed Courage Amid Terror

A summit celebrates the bravery of those who responded to brutality with humanity



Photo: Stephanie Mora, Search for Common Ground

A new generation of Burundians celebrate their elders, who forged new ground so their children could live in peace.

Eugene Buhinta, a 23-year-old student from Bujumbura, said, “We the young, we will live on now having seen these examples of such courageous people and that can give us hope for a better future.”

Telling Our Story

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Since its independence in 1962, Burundi has struggled with violence, assassinations and coups d’etat. Political extremism attached itself to ethnicity, creating fear, mistrust and panic among the people, shattering their ethnic harmony and coexistence. Neighbor turned on neighbor. But not everyone succumbed to the madness.

Since 1999, Studio Ijambo, a radio station established and supported by USAID, has aired a weekly program called Pillars of Humanity, highlighting stories of Burundians who, during moments of extreme crisis and violence, risked their own lives to save another’s.

In 2003, Studio Ijambo invited all those featured Burundians to participate in the Heroes’ Summit, recognizing their courage and leadership. The summit, which was broadcast live on radio, featured a forum that gave a voice to these heroes. Hailing from Burundi, as well as Rwanda, Congo and Nigeria, attendees discussed their experiences, their vision for the future and strategies for peace and reconciliation.

The summit also featured Playback Theater, which recounted stories of individual bravery. One story told of a Hutu woman who hid her Tutsi neighbors in her field to conceal them from Hutu militia. After the militia left the area, her younger brother tried to escort them to safety, but the group met with a Tutsi mob that overpowered and killed her brother because he was a Hutu. The woman has been ostracized as a traitor by her family ever since. After watching the actors retell her story, the woman said through tears that she believes that she did the right thing, and perhaps now that she has been recognized as a hero, her family will believe it too.

Over the course of the three-day summit, hundreds of such stories were told — stories of humanity, courage, defiance and compassion. Told to accept hatred and brutality, Burundi’s heroes chose to listen to their internal voices. It meant risking their lives, and for many, it meant danger and difficulty lasting long after the moment of their act of courage had passed. Now their bravery is finally being recognized.

“There is an inspiring face of Burundi that has been hidden from the world,” said Studio Ijambo’s Adrien Sindayigaya. “The Summit has been a celebration of humanity.”