HORROR

For some of the 14 Penn students who spent two weeks helping at the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village for Rwandans orphaned in the country's genocidal conflict, the experience brought back memories of personal tragedy. For all of them, it was a stark reminder of the horrors humans have inflicted on each other. But it was also an inspiring time, "all about hope, all about the future."

The skulls and femurs are stacked from the floor to the ceiling, like a bookshelf taken from the set of a gruesome horror movie. The musty smell of decaying bones is consuming, the shrapnel holes ominous. There are traces of blood everywhere, on the walls, on the ceiling, on the old pieces of clothes piled upon more bloody clothes. Death, in its most raw form, is inescapable.

It's here, at the Nyamata Church in southeastern Rwanda, where up to 10,000 members of the Tutsi ethnic group fled at the height of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, only to be trapped and slaughtered by enemy Hutus at the very place they sought refuge. Today, the skulls, many still cracked from the clubs or machetes that beat them, remain inside the church and in another mass grave outside it, serving as a haunting memorial for the genocide that took the lives of an estimated 800,000 Rwandans over a 100-day span.

For Zack Rosen, the strong-willed captain of the Penn basketball team, the vivid scene is too much. He kneels to the ground, thinks about his grandparents who survived the Holocaust, and weeps. He feels an arm around his neck. It's his basketball teammate, Dau Jok, an African whose own father was the victim of similar ethnic violence. Beside them, another Penn student whose father was murdered, Humna Bhojani, has what she'd later call "a complete breakdown," crying over the senseless killings she knew too much about. Somewhere nearby, classmate Sindhuri Nandhakumar feels a mixture of anger, frustration, and confusion as she thinks about the civil war that ravaged her native country of Sri Lanka for decades.

For Rosen, Jok, Bhojani, Nandhakumar, and some of the other 14 students from the University who are in Rwanda for a school-sponsored service trip, the jarring images at Nyamata trigger a flood of somber thoughts and memories from their own lives. For others, seeing the remnants of such horrid mass murders is like nothing they could have ever envisioned, leading to discussions that are as much emotional as they are intellectual.

But the Penn students know they cannot let their emotions get the best of them, not for very long at least. Waiting for support and comfort back at the youth village where they're staying are a group of teenagers, some of whose parents' remains still lie within that church.

ERICA SACHSE; OPPOSITE PAGE: MICHAEL URAM

AND HOPE

BY DAVE ZEITLIN

Above: Penn students Sindhuri Nandhakumar, Erica Sachse, and Claire Shimberg with local children on the road to Rubona, near the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village. (For safety reasons, no ASYV residents were photographed for this story.) Opposite page: Remains of genocide victims in Nyamata Church in southeastern Rwanda, where they were murdered.

It Takes a Village

As the Hutus were systematically hunting down and murdering Tutsis in 1994, a philanthropic alumna named Anne Heyman C'82 was giving birth to her third child and deciding to quit her job as a New York district attorney to raise her family. Her life was changing, and though she had always been aware of social issues, the Rwandan genocide was not something she followed very closely. "It's sometimes astonishing to me," Heyman says now, "that I knew as little as I did."

That would change a decade later when Heyman and her husband Seth Merrin—the founder and CEO of Liquidnet Holdings, a financial services firm—hosted a lecture at Tufts University (of which Merrin is an alumnus) through "Moral Voices," a Hillel-sponsored initiative they founded to focus on different social injustices every year. For this particular lecture, in 2005, the subject was the Rwandan genocide.

Before the speech began, Merrin asked the speaker what was the single biggest problem facing Rwanda today. "And he said, 'In a country where we have 1.2 million orphans, without a systemic solution to dealing with the problem there is no future for the country,'" Heyman recalls. "It occurred to me immediately that there is a solution to dealing with the orphan problem. They just needed to build youth villages. I thought it was a great idea but nobody was willing to do it."

So Heyman, a native of South Africa, decided to do it herself. Inspired by the model created in Israel to deal with the orphans of the Holocaust, Heyman—an active Jew who's always been guided by the Hebrew phrase "Tikkun olam," which means, "repairing the world"—launched her ambitious project in September 2006. For the next six months, she spent equal time in New York, Rwanda, and Israel to create the proper structure for her new youth village, raise enough funds, get fiscal oversight from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, find suitable land, and hire Rwandan architects to oversee the construction of the buildings, among other all-consuming tasks. She had found her new full-time job.

Once the 144-acre Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village ("Agahozo" means "dry one's tears" in Kinyarwanda, a dialect of the Rwanda-Rundi language, and "Shalom" means "peace" in Hebrew) was built in the Eastern Province of Rwanda, the next step was finding its future occupants. With the assistance of the Rwandan government, which helped identify some of the most vulnerable children in each of the country's 30 districts (some were orphans, while others had one living parent), a team from the youth village went out to conduct interviews before the selections were made. "I would say that is the toughest part," says Heyman, who studied politics of the Third World while at Penn, "and I am very grateful that I personally don't participate in it."

Even if it's on a relatively small scale—the village houses around 375 high school-aged students—it was immediately clear what kind of impact Heyman was making. One child was hospitalized as soon as he came into the village because he had a bad case of malaria—"He would have died if he wasn't with us," Heyman says—and others needed to be treated for burns, diseases, and malnutrition immediately. Wherever they had lived previously—whether it was at a boarding school or at a neighbor's house or even out on the streets—these children of the Rwandan genocide, predictably, were not getting the necessary medical care to properly grow up and, in many cases, survive. Now, they finally were.

And yet, healthcare is only a part of the village's mission. Education is another. The curriculum stresses the arts, com-

MICHAEL URAM; PHOTO OF ANNE HEYMAN BY KEVIN THOMAS GARCIA

Anne Heyman C'82 and her husband founded ASYV, modeled on efforts in Israel to care for Holocaust orphans, after learning that dealing with the country's 1.2 million orphans was the biggest challenge facing Rwanda. In addition to working and interacting with ASYV residents, the Penn students spent time at the village in reading and discussion.

munity service, and basic life skills. Heyman hopes it will prepare the students of Agahozo to graduate and be able to give back to their communities, in ways they could never have done previously. That, she is convinced, is the only way to give Rwanda a future.

"We have an obligation to help others," Heyman says. "And those children, in return, will have an obligation to do for others. And that is how we make our world a better place."

"You're Not Going to Save Africa"

At different points during his stay at the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, Rabbi Mike Uram would be asked a question he really didn't know how to answer. "You're Jewish," one of the orphans would say. "What was your genocide like?"

Uram, the director of the Penn Hillel, led the students' trip to Rwanda over the final two weeks in May. His grandparents, like Rosen's, were Holocaust survivors. But being asked that question still produced what he'd later call an "awkward moment." His grandparents had been able to come to the United States to start a new life, an ocean away from where the Nazis wiped out two-thirds of the European Jewish population. Many of the Rwandan orphans, meanwhile, still lived in the same country where their parents were murdered, perhaps nearby the very people that murdered them. He didn't know what he could possibly say to them.

"The hard thing to wrap your mind around is that someone who killed your father is living next door to you and how do you ever get over that?" Uram says. "How do you go on with your life? Is it right to forgive? Is that real justice?"

Or, in simpler terms: "How does a society go from normalcy to insanity and back again?"

These were some of the questions that Uram and the 14 Penn students grappled with before, during, and after their trip to Rwanda (which was organized by Penn Hillel and funded by the Faith & Service Partners initiative of Penn's Fox Leadership Program). And even if there were no real answers, the questions themselves were an important part of the dialogue between each other and with the residents of Agahozo-Shalom. It's one large reason why Heyman has encouraged different American universities to visit the village throughout the year—but also why she typically offers one piece of valuable advice before they leave. "You're not going to save Africa in two weeks," she says. "You're going to learn how most of the world lives and understand the issues that face them and have a conversation with yourself at this point, thinking, 'How does this fit in my life?'"

For the Penn students, the trip was structured into three components. First, they provided real service, building a garden and a fire pit, so that the student-run canteen would become more of a communal meeting spot in the center of the village. The second part was learning: After performing all the manual labor in the Rwandan sun, they'd sit under a mango tree and have deep, reflective conversations about religion, service, and violence. And lastly, they strived to have a cultural interchange with the children of the village, bonding with them over meals, playing games with them, teaching them English, learning about their art and music, and generally enjoying all of their daily routines and activities.

They weren't saving Africa, but they were making a difference in a few kids' lives.

"Before leaving for Agahozo-Shalom, I didn't know what to expect of the youth village," says Nandhakumar. "I was curious to see what a place like Agahozo could do not just for the children but also for Rwanda as a whole. In a few conversations I had with friends and family, a lot of issues were brought up; some of them surrounded the fact that these were only 375 of Rwanda's many orphans, and another big question was how you make an initiative like this sustainable. Being in the village, and interacting with everyone there, helped answer a lot of those questions. What struck me the most about the village was the dignity and respect that was so evident in every encounter we had. The kids had respect for each other, for us, for their house mothers, and everyone else."

The orphans also had something no one from Penn really expected: hope.

> "Despite everything they could use as an excuse, they've decided to believe," Rosen says. "If we haven't experienced tragedy like that and we have a lack of faith, then what the hell is wrong with us? They wake up every morning believing that the world is great. They are an example of doing more."

Destroying the Notion of Otherness

For some of the Penn students, there was, admittedly, a small barrier in the way when they first arrived at Agahozo-Shalom. It didn't take long, however, for those walls to crumble. "The conversations were very superficial," says Bhojani. "Then, as I got to know them, the conversations became really real."

Real didn't always mean deep. Bhojani, for one, learned that many of the orphans liked the rapper Tupac Shakur, just like she did. Nandhakumar smiled along as the entire village ate cake and sang "Happy Birthday" for her during "Village Time," when everyone gathers and puts on presentations and performances. Kayla Kapito, a diplomatic history major at Penn, enjoyed nighttime Justin Bieber dance parties with the kids. And still other Penn students taught the kids guitar, or carried them on their backs during hikes, or helped them sign up for Facebook. "Wherever you are in the world," Kapito says, "teenagers are teenagers."

And, of course, most teenagers like sports—which is where Rosen and Jok really made their mark. "The language of basketball is universal," says Rosen, an all-Ivy League point guard. "We couldn't speak their language but we spoke basketball." So while they were there, the two Quaker hoopsters each coached separate teams, which were pitted against each other for two marquee games. That much we know; the rest is a little hazy.

"By the way, I was 2-0 against Zack, so put that out there," Jok laughs.

"The second game we won," Rosen retorts. "Those are the facts. He's a liar."

Playful ribbing aside, sports certainly helped bridge the gap. The first day they arrived in Rwanda, Rosen and classmate Brian Powers jumped right into the middle of a soccer game and didn't miss a beat. "If you looked at a photograph all you'd see was otherness," Uram says. "There are these privileged, white Penn students living in the developed world and these rural African kids living in the developing world—and yet within five minutes they're playing soccer together.

"What was overwhelming for me and the students was the profound connection we felt with the students in the youth village," Uram added. "It destroyed the notion of otherness."

The notion of otherness was similarly destroyed by the way the Penn students interacted with each other. With the idea of developing an interfaith trip, from among the approximately 70 applicants overall Uram selected students of different religious backgrounds—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist—and from several different countries, including Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. The Hillel director was rewarded by not only how well everyone bonded but also how much they tried to learn. "I was blown away to see the conversations Penn students were having with each other," Uram says. "To see a Jewish woman and a Muslim sit and talk for four hours about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to see a deeply devout Christian talking to a Jewish student and trying to understand how his faith can be true and also how to love and respect this Jewish person—to go that deep, I think, was a huge takeaway and makes me even more committed to this kind of work."

The Penn students also had meaningful conversations with the Rwandans, who cared as much, if not more, about the political future of the country as they did about reading and arithmetic. Of course, even Penn's finest minds couldn't always give their hosts rational answers about how a nation can spiral into chaos, or, even more, how it can recover from that. And they especially didn't know what to say when, after they had returned teary-eyed and shaken from the mass gravesite, some of the orphans told them that their parents were killed there.

But, in the end, just talking made a world of difference. And that was when they realized how similar they actually were. Just like them, the orphans wanted to lead a good life, to get a good job, to make good friends—and to dance and sing and kick balls along the way. The students from Penn and Agahozo-Shalom came from very different worlds but had very similar hopes.

"That's the crazy thing about it," Jok says. "The whole village is all about hope, all about the future. It was all about love and togetherness. They're so inspired for the future. They have so many aspirations."

Holding on to Rwanda

While the entire trip was structured around open dialogue, Jok wasn't in a talking mood one particular day, as everyone hiked seven miles from the youth village to a lake. Quietly, the Penn sophomore looked around—at the houses, the crops, the kids playing soccer—and, just as quietly, was transported back to his homeland. "It was if I was physically in Sudan," Jok says. "That's how I felt."

For Jok, who grew up nearby in South Sudan, being in Rwanda brought back a flood of memories. And the Rwandan orphans could look to Jok's story as a guiding force in their own lives: a story that begins with a six-year-old African boy picking up an AK-47 and vowing revenge on the Arab men loyal to the government in North Sudan who killed his father, a general in the rebel movement and political party, the Sudan People's Liberation Army ... and ends with a Division I college basketball player harboring only feelings of love for his native country. "When I was young, I was angry," admits Jok, who in 2003 immigrated to Des Moines, Iowa, with his mother and three siblings. "Every day, it was like, How do I get back at the Arabs? Then I realized that me being angry doesn't affect the Arabs. It affects me. If you forgive someone, your heart is open and you live your life."

Sports proved to be the ultimate healing potion for Jok. In Sudan, he used to make soccer balls out of balloons and bandages, if only so he could escape the civil war for a few hours at a time. "When you're playing soccer, you're not hungry anymore," Jok says. "You're not thinking about the war. You're at peace." Staying busy with sports was just as important when he came to Iowa—and not just because he developed into a star high school basketball player and a high-profile Penn recruit. "If I didn't do basketball, cross country, and soccer, I would have gone into a

John Plaisted helps mix concrete to construct benches and tables for a gathering area outside the student canteen.

MICHAEL URAM

gang," he says. "That's the reality of it. All the Sudanese kids I knew when I first came, they were all in gangs. When I got to my senior year [of high school], 75 percent of them were locked up."

With that in mind, Jok is striving to help today's children of Sudan by creating a sports-centric afterschool program through the Dut Jok Youth Foundation, which he began and named in honor of his late father. The foundation recently got a $10,000 jumpstart when Jok was named a winner of the Davis Projects for Peace award, money he's already using to send soccer balls, basketballs, nets, and whistles to South Sudan (which in July became a sovereign nation, though one that is still overrun by poverty and violence).

After leaving Rwanda, Jok was supposed to go to Sudan to help get the afterschool program off the ground. But, after careful review, his Penn advisors nixed that plan because of security concerns. At first, that was a tough pill to swallow for Jok, who was anxious to return to his homeland for the first time since leaving. He realizes now, however, that the setback won't be a detriment to his long-term plans, which include building a secondary school in South Sudan. Besides, staying in Agahozo was still eye-opening as he saw firsthand all that goes into giving young Africans an outlet for success. "The youth village served as an example for me," Jok says. "It says it can be done."

Penn students with workers at ASYV: (students in back row, from left) Max Cohen, Dau Jok, Brian Powers, Erica Sachse, Zack Rosen, Ben Notkin, Humna Bhojani, Rachel Olstein (Director of Volunteer Services, ASYV); (front row) Rabbi Mike Uram, Gurnimrat Sidhu, Kayla Kapito, Sindhuri Nandhakumar, Claire Shimberg, Elisheva Goldberg, John Plaisted, Lisa Doi, Ariella Alpert (ASYV staff).

During the trip, Jok also got the opportunity to have many conversations with Bhojani, a Pakistan native whose childhood was similarly marred by tragedy. In 1995, while waiting outside his apartment for the company car to take him to his job at Indus Motor Company in the city of Karachi, Bhojani's father was gunned down. To this day, Bhojani does not know who killed him or why he was murdered, although she suspects either the Pakistani government or a rival religious sect did it. While that kind of uncertainty only compounded her sadness and confusion, she says that she "felt no hate toward those who killed him."

Bhojani does, however, have sympathy for many of the other children in Pakistan who have lost parents. Not everyone, she knows, can get a ticket out of the country by being accepted to an Ivy League school. So she wants to try to help those who can't—although she's not yet sure what that entails or where the money will come from. "There's a big orphan problem in Pakistan," Bhojani says. "A lot of times orphans end up being sexually abused—it's really a major problem. I've wanted to do something about it for a long time but the youth village made it more tangible for me."

While Agahozo-Shalom certainly shaped Jok's and Bhojani's aspirations more than anyone else on the trip, other Penn students plan to bring a little piece of the youth village home with them, too. For Kapito, that means trying to get a bunch of Penn students to wake up at 6 a.m. and run, clap, sing, and chant around campus; the youth villagers call that "Muchaka Muchaka" and it's one of the highlights of their week. For Nandhakumar, who still has many confused feelings about the Sri Lankan civil war that ended in 2009 after 26 years of fighting, it means thinking not just about the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide but ways to prevent mass violence in other countries like Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, even if the lack of systemic solutions can often be frustrating. And for Rosen, it means trying to be a better basketball captain by, for the first time, fully understanding the meaning of perseverance.

"Despite everything they could use as an excuse, they've decided to believe," Rosen says. "And so if we haven't experienced tragedy like that and we have a lack of faith, then what the hell is wrong with us? They wake up every day believing the world is great. They are an example of doing more."

As of now, the 14 Penn students—Bhojani, Jok, Kapito, Nandhakumar, Powers, Rosen, Max Cohen, Lisa Doi, Elisheva Goldberg, Benjamin Notkin, John Plaisted, Erica Sachse, Claire Shimberg, and Gurnimrat Sidhu—plan to meet throughout the school year; that was Uram's plan when he decided not to include any seniors on the trip. Many of them also hope to go back to the youth village, or buy airplane tickets so some of the kids can come to them.

But even if they never return, even if some of them believe their two-week stay was inconsequential, or that they couldn't adequately give enough support to teenagers who had been through such immense hardship, they only need to think about the 16-year-old who stopped Uram right before he left to tell him, "Mike, now you are going to be with me like my family. And I will need your wisdom to help me live my life."

And then one orphan, in one village, in one country, in one continent across the Atlantic Ocean, smiled and waved goodbye.◆

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