

Healing Through Poetry By Us

Rwanda

Wesleyan University

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"I keep dropping my head and losing my senses over and over again, but who do I talk to when silence holds the chains on wretched souls longing for the freedom to call on the voices that quench the thirst for knowledge? I shall forever listen to that voice, sit with it, chat with it, let it recite with my tongue, speak through my ink and together we shall tour the places spreading the seeds of peace."

--Constance Hirwa

Context and Purpose

It has been 28 years since the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda, and still, the journey to healing from the trauma is hindered by the lack of conversations around the mental health aftermath of this tragedy. The government of Rwanda has put much effort in eradicating any genocide ideology through the campaign of "Ndi Umunyarwanda," which translates into "I am Rwandan." This strategy succeeded in uprooting any ethnic groups division amongst Rwandans. However, in doing so, it overshadowed room for open conversations around the trauma and experiences of genocide survivors and witnesses. As a result, we, the younger generation, experience the trauma in our parents' hearts and how it channels into the intergenerational gap. It indirectly affected mental health in general where children grow up with minimal access to mental health knowledge and the culture still view mental health disorders as a luxury instead of serious normal diseases. We believe that the emotional intelligence and expression are key to healing one's mental health disorders. Indeed, we best express our emotions through poetry, which is why we chose a poetry book as our means to share mental health tales.

Goal and methods

The first step to healing is normalizing mental health experiences and the availability of resources. So, as young poets, we thought that the best way we can unite into what seems like a mental health crisis is using our talent to spread stories of how some people deal with mental health and write poems that decentralize access to mental health issues. Like a diary or journal, we hope that our book, written with fellow young Rwandan poet Inkindi Muqtar, will provide a daily testimonial of multitude range of mental health stories that high school students yearn for. Additionally, we know that it takes a village to create a support system where people facing mental health can heal and flourish. So, we are planning to embark on high school tours to model how to initiate and explore mental health conversations, to let them know that it is okay to share one's experiences and not suffer alone. We also hope to fight stigma around living with mental health disorders while shedding light on the support systems available in Rwanda. We seek to promote peace starting with high school students by encouraging them to seek psychiatric help and teaching them various self-care methods such as art and meditation to alleviate mental health issues and become comfortable having these conversations with their parents. The project will happen in four parts, and in each step, we will be partnering with various Rwandan-owned or based NGOs.

Part I: The Tales of a Healing Heart (May - mid-June)

Our book, *The Tales of a Healing Heart*, consists of three divisions. The first division embodies poems that discuss the trauma that resulted from the 1994 Genocide and how to bridge the intergeneration gap between today's youth and the older generation. The second division poems explore the broad spectrum of mental health disorders and combat mental health stigma. We conducted a preliminary survey to gauge high schoolers' thoughts on mental health, where most of them thought that mental health is not real. Many of them did not understand how mental health can be treated medically. Thus, poems in the third division focus on psychiatric resources, the crucial role of a healthy support system, self-care practices, and many other artistic ways to heal and promote peace. It took us around two years to write and collect our poems together. We foresee spending May to mid-June 2022 working with our partner Imfura Heritage Publishers to apply for copyright, edit and print the book. The goal is to print 600 book copies, where 300 books will be distributed in schools, 100 books in public libraries, and 200 copies sold for profit. Imfura Heritage is a Rwandan youth-owned company;

so, we want our book to be edited and revised by Rwandans who know the authenticity of our story and the voices embodied in each poem. Letter of support from Imfura Heritage is attached.

Part II: Connecting with schools and speakers

We plan to visit fifteen schools located in five provinces of Rwanda. Thus, from Mid-June to Mid-July, we will focus our effort on connecting and reaching out to schools and keynote speakers. In Rwanda, a student attends at least two schools to complete their high school education; thus, that makes a total of six schools that we attended. Considering that we are living amidst the covid-19 pandemic, we will adhere to all covid regulation. Nonetheless, our biggest anticipated challenge is getting permission into schools. In that regard, we discern strategies to successfully get connected to different schools. As alumni to our high schools, we will contact headmasters/mistresses of each school and we are certain that those schools will cooperate and allow us to give back. Additionally, Alice and Constance are Bridge2Rwanda scholars, and that program recruit high school students from various schools in Rwanda for a gap year program. So, we will contact high schools that has a partnership with Bridge2Rwanda (B2R) to allows to visit their schools. At B2R, we are in contact with Chaste Niwe, and he will connect us to a variety of 20 schools in partnership with B2R. Moreover, we will work with the first runner-up Miss Rwanda 2021, Amanda Akaliza and her foundation, Humeka, since her project promotes mental health care in Rwanda. We hope that Akaliza's presence further grabs high schoolers' attention and amplifies our message. Humeka has been working with high schools in Kigali city; so, we can easily tour the schools that they already work with. Letter from Humeka is attached.

Part III: High School tours (August)

Throughout August, we shall conduct school tours with the purpose of modeling open conversations and initiating the creation of a safe space where mental health and Genocide trauma conversations can be held intentionally and peacefully. We want to hold space for the high schoolers to learn about mental health, unlearn the stigma around mental health, normalize experiencing a mental health disorder, heal, and create peace. The book contains mental health stories and resources to act as a seed that will grow into further conversations, sharing stories amongst each other, acquiring some simple healthy self-care tools, and knowing public mental health resources in Rwanda. We will gift free copies to students; around 25 copies per school. More importantly, we aspire to work with each campus to create clubs centered on mental health awareness and inclusivity; clubs whose mission would be validating and listening to students combating mental health and directing them to appropriate resources. These clubs are just space for conversations not therapy sessions; so Humeka company will work with the school to train one staff to oversee the clubs and keep them safe. Through our partnership with B2R, they will offer one of their counselors to accompany us on school tours. If any mental health crisis arises during our school tours, the B2R counselor will help de-escalate the situation and refer the student to further resources. However, our goal is not to re-traumatize any student, rather to encourage them to seek the help they may need. Thus, conversations will be kept to a safe tone fit for a large group discussion. In the end, we shall offer clubs with stipend for them to buy supplies and self-care tools.

Part IV: Long term plan

We envision that Inkindi, who is in Rwanda, and Miss Akaliza will offer a constant mentorship to each club for at least one academic year to ensure their growth and sustainability. Furthermore, we shall spare around 200 book copies with Imfura Heritage to sell, and the profit will finance the clubs and pay for the Humeka's services.

Impact of the project:

We believe that our project and our partners' help will transgress over high schools in Rwanda. We aspire to leave a seed of mental health clubs in each school, encourage openness to mental health, and create a safe space that fosters a culture of peer support. At the end of our tours, we believe that every student will explore different ways that feel more natural to them to express their emotions. We use poetry, but each student is welcome to explore unique ways to express their emotion; be it photography, drawing, taking a walk, or crying. We dream that over time, the generational gap and genocide trauma ends with our generation; we want the next generations to be born in a healing country full of peace. We believe that the Davis Project for Peace grant is the backbone we need to put all pieces together and implement our project for the lives of infinite Rwandans, notably high schoolers.