Empowering women through a recreational center
Rwanda
Carleton College
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Project Summary: My project was to work with teen mothers in rural areas of eastern Rwanda to teach them about sewing and handicraft skills to help them become financially independent and generate income to support their children.

Due to the fact that I grew up in a society where girls were continuously being denied access to education, especially being educated about reproductive health, many teenagers dropout of school as a result of early unplanned pregnancies and end up being stigmatized by their families. This causes many teen mothers to abandon their children. As one born from a helpless teen mother, I grew up wanting to change the fact that many teen mothers tend to abandon their children in Rwanda who then grow up in unfavorable conditions. I wanted to support these innocent children by first empowering their vulnerable mothers because most families cast out their daughters once they get pregnant.

When deciding to implement my project in Cyeru (a village near the small town of Kanazi), I wanted to give teen mothers a lifetime skill that they will use to generate income, but also to instill confidence in them so that they become aware of their strength and reach their fullest potential. We chose teen mothers between the age of 15 and 21 who needed the most support. We had set criteria to qualify for the project, which included being single and not living with a husband. These women had to have dropped out of school and to have basic reading and writing skills. I wanted these teen mothers make the best use of the training opportunity, and I determined the period of time that they would need to learn all the skills that they wanted to was six months, which exceeded my summer break.

Working with Nibakure Community Village, a non-profit that has a good reputation in the community, allowed me to trust that my project was going to be sustainable and successful because we shared the same mission and they were willing to run the program and supervise it while I was back in school. We are partners and share responsibility to support teen mothers. The non-profit offered a lot of financial and capital support like a building we are using as a training center and other materials they had we needed to use. They provided administrative staff to work with the teachers that we had hired and also donated more than $300 to buy materials.

We realized that we would experience shortage of funds and the strict budget we had since we altered the duration for which the program would last. My initial estimated cost of buying materials was different from the prices that I found on the market because inflation had gone high and the process of starting the program required certification to be an approved program that is standardized by the Rwanda training board. We had to buy all the equipment that was required for us to meet the certifying criteria and design a curriculum to follow while providing training to ensure that the students got the right skills needed for the job market. The machines were expensive and we had to narrow our initial goal to sewing as our only focus and postponed handicraft making. After gathering all the information that was needed and also interviewing students and teachers, the program went smoothly. We have a budget that will provide breakfast and lunch for six months. I am hopeful that with the passionate staff we have, the program will be successfully implemented even in my absence.

In the beginning I was scared that the project was not going to be feasible because the space we had was open and it required moving machines every morning from storage to be used in the studying area which was outside. I was worried that the machines would be broken easily but with the help of the students we learned to be careful moving them. The only concern that may arise is that we do not have enough money to buy a machine for each student for graduation. But this is a well set up project that – if we are blessed enough to get funds – we can operate for a long period of time.

I am hopeful that the skills given to these teen mothers will be useful in supporting their children and I have hope that it will change their lives for good. Bringing together women with the same problems to share their hardships and be a support system for each is the most rewarding gift to me. Working closely with the teen mothers has inspired me to live selflessly and to find my purpose by fighting for less privileged citizens of our societies. I believe that by working on this project, bringing women together will
help them to overcome their challenges since they not only work to gain financial independence but also learn to forgive themselves and their families that abandoned them. By forgiving themselves, they will forgive their husbands and family, but mostly, they will forgive their children and love them unconditionally.

When I first met with the teen mothers, they were dirty, hopeless, and angry in their hearts because of the struggles they had to go through without the support of their parents and their children’s fathers. But because of inspiring positive workshops we taught, they have forgiven them and are focusing on how they can make their future bright with their children. The fact that we were able to eliminate negativity in people and spread a new hope for tomorrow is what I consider creating peace. I know that this will change a generation in the near future as we teach people how to think better and give them the right skills to earn a living. We are now certain that the women we trained will use sewing machines and their hands to make money and rely on their strength to make a living. In the long-run, I envision working with the financially independent women who were a product of one summer that I spent productively in my home country, Rwanda.