

Rwanda Girls Primed to Lead, Thanks to Bellevue Women

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By Gary T. Smith

Rwanda, a small, agrarian country in the highlands of Central and East Africa still healing from the horrors of genocide, is a nation in transition. Women carrying jugs of water on their heads walk on broad modern boulevards.

It is the nation's strategic vision to transform the country into a middle class, knowledge-based economy, although public secondary education was not offered after the ninth grade until 2012.

The country is one of only two in the world where women make up a majority in the national parliament. And to be a girl in Rwanda today, said speaker Vanessa Giramata, is to live with two major impediments: not having access to knowledge, and not believing you can change things.

New school is transformational

Until, that is, Gashora Girls Academy. Founded by two Bellevue women, Shalisan Foster and Suzanne Sinegal McGill, the secondary school for promising Rwanda girls has in just four graduating classes placed 348 young women into colleges and universities in 19 countries, winning \$30 million in scholarships and aid. Graduates attend every Ivy League school and Stanford.



To guide the discussion of this remarkable social venture, President **Mark Wright** introduced his Emmy Award-winning KING-TV colleague, morning anchor Joyce Taylor. Taylor interviewed co-founder McGill and a Gashora Girls Academy graduate now majoring in agricultural economics at Washington State University, Vanessa Giramata.

The germ of the idea, said McGill, was a discussion with her good friend Shalisan Foster. We were struck, she said, that our kids were so fortunate and yet so many are not. We talked about what we could do to help in the field of education.

McGill said she and Foster were drawn to Sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular to Rwanda, with the ongoing rebirth of a country recovering from genocide. “We were thinking small, like donating some computers and soccer balls, but we kept talking to people and researching.”

Educating girls is a ‘Silver Bullet’

“We had a lot of energy around educating girls,” McGill explained. “Research shows it is probably the single most powerful tool, a real silver bullet in transforming communities. We quickly saw the need and the possibility to do more. Our little project became a secondary school for girls, which in itself can be very powerful, but people told us, ‘if you’re going to do this, the goal absolutely has to be university. We need these girls to



become the leaders of our country.’ And today, we have what is the best secondary school in Rwanda, and potentially in all of East Africa,” McGill said.

They set out to find girls in all parts of Rwanda, especially from rural areas, and today they have recruited students from 27 of the country’s 30 districts. Gashora Girls Academy focuses on STEM education. It is a boarding school with its own farm.

Reflecting on how transformational the school is, Giramata, the alum and WSU student, said a girl in Rwanda faces two main constraints: not knowing and not believing. “It is so hard. Maybe you can find information, but you will not believe in yourself. Maybe you believe in yourself but you do not have information. Gashora Girls Academy was an answer to those two constraints at same time.”

“I was so struck by how people would look at us and believe in us,’ she said. “It was a motivation for me. I was like, if they believe I can do this, I was very sure that I could do this.”

Inspired to a purpose beyond self

It also radically altered her sense of purpose. “I believe I can do something more than just myself, So, yes, I am going to learn. I am going to achieve things, yes, but things that are going to be impactful to the rest of the world. It’s not going to be limited to me. It’s not going to be limited to my family. It’s something that will impact all the girls all

around the world, all around Africa, all around Rwanda. Before, it was, ‘how do I survive? How do I make it?’ But now it’s: I will do it, not just for myself, but for the rest of the world.”



McGill said “When I have a chance to talk with these young women, one of the most breathtaking things is the way they talk about what they’re going to do. It’s not about going all over the world to study. They talk about ‘I want to be the first pediatric oncologist in Rwanda, because there isn’t one.’ And ‘I want to be the best so I can go back to my country.’”

Or, as Giramata said, “You learn from people like Miss Soozi and Miss Shal, and all of you here, that your life should be a legacy, and everyone should take lessons from it – that you should grow and develop and impact the rest of the world.”

President Mark announced that the Rwanda Girls Initiative was just named one of world’s 100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs of 2017 at Goldman Sachs’ Builders + Innovators Summit 2017. Learn more about Gashora Girls Academy at <http://www.rwandagirlsinitiative.org/>.

Seattle 4 wins ‘Golden Doughnut’

Before the main program, David Bobanick, Executive Director of Rotary First Harvest, presented Seattle 4 with Rotary First Harvest’s “Golden Doughnut Award.” Rotary First Harvest is the longest running Rotary District project in the world. The Golden Doughnut Award goes to the Rotary club that provides the largest number of volunteers during the year. For the previous ten years, the Bellevue Breakfast club has won the honor. Last year, Seattle 4 members donated more than 500 hours. Bobanick also thanked the Club for its financial contributions. He



said the gift from Seattle 4's Rotary Service Fund of \$15,000 last year supported about 900,000 servings of nutritious fresh food to hungry families.

To begin the program, **Connie Miller** delivered the invocation, reading a prayer reflecting on being embraced by unending Love even when we do not perceive it.

Jimmy Collins led *America the Beautiful*, accompanied by **Freeman Fong** on the piano.

