

AIM for Africa: Rwanda

JILL SONKE

The UF Center for the Arts in Healthcare's AIM for Africa initiatives create cultural bridges between the arts and healthcare in the U.S. and African nations. In March of 2009, UF students and faculty spent two weeks in Rwanda implementing programs in a government-built genocide survivor village and in two regional health clinics.

The primary goals of the initiative were: 1) to provide relevant education to healthcare professionals and lay healthcare providers in the Rugerero Survivor Village and surrounding region; 2) to use theatre and the visual arts to enhance health literacy and community engagement in the Rugerero region; 3) to use the arts to enhance familiarity with and utilization of health services in the Rugerero region; and 4) to create and present to Florida audiences a theatre production utilizing international exchange and dialogue, and exploring relevant social issues.

Two CAHRE faculty members, along with four student members of the College of Fine Arts' International Fine Arts for Healing (IFAH) organization, four UF School of Theatre & Dance theatre majors, and two UF College of Nursing graduate students, traveled to Rwanda to implement the projects in partnership with the Red Cross of the Western Region of Rwanda, the Barefoot Artists, Engineers without Borders, Jefferson Health, and the Rwandan Village Concept Project. While the actors used playback and improvisational theatre techniques to help residents tell their stories of survival, loss and healing, the art and nursing students collaborated with local partners to undertake significant health education projects, such as murals, in two primary clinics and several health outposts, several area schools,



and in the village. The health and health education projects focused on nutrition, hygiene, HIV prevention, and women's empowerment.

Upon their return, the actors were joined by other theatre students and, working under the direction of Dr. Mikell Pinkney, created a full-evening work reflecting the cross-cultural collaboration and learning that took place in Rwanda. The performance piece reflected the students' experiences in Rwanda and related them to cultural issues of violence and healing in Rwanda as well as in the United States. The piece was presented in a variety of venues in the Gainesville community, including the Alachua Juvenile Detention Center, Shands Hospital, and a 6-day run at the McGuire Blackbox Theatre, to spur awareness of the potential for violence and for

healing in any society.

The AIM for Africa Rwanda project will continue through 2010 with extended residencies in Rugerero by healthcare providers, artists, and faculty and students from the UF School of Architecture who will lead the building of a health clinic in Rugerero Village. For more information, see www.arts.ufl.edu/CAHRE/aimrwanda.asp.

Jill Sonke is Director of the Center for the Arts in Healthcare Research and Education (CAHRE) as well as Assistant Director of Shands Arts in Medicine program. The AIM for Africa Rwanda project was supported through funding from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs and the UF Center for World Arts, and undertaken in partnership with Barefoot Artists, the UF School of Theatre and Dance, Shands Arts in Medicine, Jefferson Health, Engineers without Borders, and the Rwandan Village Concept Project.

