



Hospitality Triumphs over Tragedy

Educational alliance adds hope to Rwanda's future

BY MIRIAM WEINSTEIN '08 M.B.A.

ABOVE: JWU's Rick Daniels and Akilah CEO Elizabeth Dearborn Davis tell Kathy Drohan of The Hospitality College and Susan Connery, director of the Alan Shawn Feinstein Community Service Center about Akilah, at the Culinary Arts Museum at JWU in October.

“My story starts here,” Rick Daniels says, holding a tiny gray-white remnant of a clam shell between his fingers. Daniels is coordinator of Admissions events at the Providence Campus where he has worked since 1995. Along with a team of student assistants, he is responsible for scores of annual events that connect thousands of potential students and parents to JWU. But it is the traditional clamboil he hosts for his small hometown that connects the shell to a school for the survivors and orphans of Rwandan genocide and the Akilah Institute for Women to Johnson & Wales University.

Each August, Daniels returns to boyhood roots in his Indian Neck neighborhood on Long Island, N.Y. In 2009, one of the guests was Daphne Petri, a Newton, Mass.-based architect. Months after his annual clamboil, Petri remembered Daniels and his connection to JWU, and e-mailed about a client developing a hospitality school in Kigali, Rwanda. Could he be of help? In the 1990s, the land-locked country's turmoil had made chilling headlines. Daniels recalled the international community's lack of response. When he read Petri's note, he felt the “proverbial spiritual tap on the shoulder.”



Women will invest 90 percent of their income in their family. By working in the hospitality industry, Akilah graduates will increase their income by at least 10 times.

One million people were killed in the Rwandan genocide. The young women of Rwanda have suffered the consequences of the conflict as survivors, widows, orphans and rape victims.

“With the adaptation of the JWU [hospitality] program, Akilah can offer its students the combination of courses, skills, competencies they need to succeed.”

—ELIZABETH DEARBORN DAVIS



Akilah opened in January 2010 with the first class of 50 students. The student body will increase to 800 students within five years. Akilah staff come from Rwanda, Uganda and the U.S.



After researching the organization, Daniels called Erin FitzGerald, JWU dean of international programs and development, and met with others in administration. Soon Elizabeth Dearborn Davis, CEO of the nonprofit Akilah Institute for Women was on the Providence Campus impressing a group of JWU decision-makers. With a degree in international development, Davis had studied the Rwandan genocide and developed a “fascination with the country,” vowing she would be a part of its rebuilding. In 2007, she founded a nonprofit to provide scholarships to street children and to support an orphanage in Kigali. The next year, after targeting the gaps between the Rwandan private sector and the education system, she and colleague Dave Hughes founded Akilah.

“We spent six months researching,” she says of the work she and a team of Rwandan and European interns conducted as she was developing the plans for the institute. They interviewed dozens of aid agencies and government officials to get a handle on where the country’s economy was heading. “Our mission was to make sure that our training was in line with what the private sector needed.”

Robert Fink, Ph.D., associate dean of The Hospitality College, suggested the university share its former associate degree curriculum in hotel management with Davis as an institute guide. He sees the economic, educational and emotional potential. “The program as they have designed it can accomplish two things: provide graduates who will have some skills and knowledge that will allow them to become contributors to the growth and development of their nation’s tourism and hospitality industries and provide a new avenue for these women to become productive contributors as adults and take on roles in which they can develop a strong sense of self-worth and independence,” Fink says.

In 2009, “Lonely Planet,” globally known adventure bible to decades of travelers, named Rwanda one of the hot top 10 travel destinations. Fifteen years previously, the country’s ethnic conflict killed nearly one million people, and the flight towards safety of another two million. The remaining citizens were predominantly women and orphans. Today, the country has a growing populace of more than 10.7 million. It is Africa’s most densely populated country. To overcome the limitations of its small, landlocked economy, during the past eight years, the government and investors have spent more than \$100 million on national park facilities, new lodges and hotels, transportation infrastructure, and cultural site upgrades to make Rwanda the hub of ecotourism in Africa.

The hospitality industry is now the fastest growing economic sector of the economy and the largest draw on foreign exchange. Travelers come to see the mountain gorillas — made famous by Jane Goodall, Ph.D., — in the volcanic region of the north and the chimps in Nyungwe Forest National Park, one of the largest tracts of mountain forest in East and Central Africa. The country is home to some 670 species of birds.

Rwanda is a wildlife and tourism destination as well as a regional conference hub. Major hotel companies are marking their territory. The 237-room Kigali Marriott Hotel in Rwanda is opening in 2012. Opulent Hotel Group is building a Hilton brand hotel as well as upscale residences. Radisson is also opening a 292-room property in 2012 in Kigali, considered to be the cleanest city in Africa. Non-biodegradable plastic bags are banned in Rwanda. Travelers arriving at the Kayibanda International airport may have them confiscated and pay close to \$4 for a reuseable cloth replacement.

In 2005, tourism revenue was \$26 million. By 2008, it jumped to \$214 million. Projections estimate it will hit \$650 million by 2020. In a nation the size of Maryland, tourism generated 343,000 jobs in 2008, an increase of 26 percent in one year. (In 2007, the state of Maryland had 141,000 jobs in tourism). The Rwandan government — 56 percent female — estimates that at least 5,000 to 6,000 people must be trained annually in the hospitality and tourism sector to keep up with present economic growth and demand.

Akilah’s first 50 students began taking courses in February 2010. Four instructors teach intensive English, health and nutrition, hospitality, leadership and ethics, public speaking, composition, and computer skills five days a week. This highly concentrated one-year program provides a critical foundation. Progression to the Diploma program is dependent on satisfactorily completing the Foundation Year. Students participate in site visits and excursions to hotels, restaurants and private businesses around the country to meet with professionals in the industry. The average age of the students is between 18 and 25. They are continuously supported and encouraged to reflect on and understand Rwanda’s past while creating hope for the future through reconciliation.

Anita Umutooni was seven years old when her country was torn apart by the genocide. Like many of those who survived, she has prevailed. After completing the equivalent of high school in a Frankophone education system, she bounced from one job to another, most of the time volunteering. As a member of Akilah’s inaugural class, she is optimistic about a career in the hospitality industry of her nation. Asked about the most interesting part of her education, she says, “First of all, I’ve learned English. Now I can communicate. Through leadership studies, we are discovering who we are, how strong we are, and how to give good service.”

In October, JWU hosted a reception for the Akilah Institute for Women’s Metropolitan Safari Tour at the Culinary Arts Museum at Johnson & Wales University. In addition to JWU students, faculty and staff, hospitality professionals from the New England area attended. Davis provided an overview of the project, but it was Umutooni and her classmate Gisele Bahati, 19, who were the center of attention. Together, they are traveling through the U.S. as ambassadors of hope on this Metropolitan Safari Tour. Providence was one of eight cities they visited over two months.

With the JWU model of hospitality in hand, Davis notes, “Johnson & Wales is the gold standard. Its graduates are career-ready and committed to the industry. We have similar goals in Rwanda. We want to make sure our students go right into the work world. With the adaptation of the JWU program, Akilah can offer its students the combination of courses, skills, competencies they need to succeed.”

Through word-of-mouth, interest in the school is growing. As the first 50 students move into their second year, another 70 spots will open. The school has received some 1,500 applications. Tuition is \$3,000 per year which covers books and lunch. Through sponsorship, all of the current students are attending on scholarships.

Says Fink, whose Ph.D. is in leadership studies, “I am in awe of the commitment that Elizabeth has made to these women. She is someone I truly respect as a leader.” In the coming years, the university will explore developing exchange programs for both JWU students and faculty.

As for Daniels, he now envisions a diverging road ahead. At 46, he talks about retiring and someday moving to Rwanda as if it’s the near future. “A clam changed my life,” he laughs. He views his shell as a symbol of hope for a recovering nation.