

## A Small Shower in the Desert

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, March 2, 2005

This past weekend, I saw “Hotel Rwanda,” one of this year’s Academy Award nominees. The film tells the story of the 1994 genocide, through a personal and true tale. It was a chilling experience, not just because the notion of genocide is impossible to comprehend, but also because of the connection I feel to that country after three visits.

During my time in that tiny Central African state, I met remarkable women like Geraldine Umugwaneza, who’s now at Harvard Law School. Her broad, gentle smile tells little of what she experienced in 1994, when historic social tensions erupted between Rwanda’s two ethnic groups: Hutus and Tutsis. A 100-day killing spree launched by Hutu extremists left 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus dead. Geraldine was only twenty years old when her mother and grandmother were buried alive in a pit latrine, her brother burned alive, and her 8 year-old sister murdered by extremists wielding machetes. When the killing stopped, she knew what she needed to do.

Summoning her will, Geraldine enrolled at the National University of Rwanda; she tells me she knew from the very beginning she would become a lawyer. The justice system, then with only a few operational courts, would have to find a way to prosecute the more than 100,000 accused perpetrators. (The Rwandan government estimates that number could reach one million—an eighth of Rwanda’s population.)

Geraldine graduated in 1999 with a law degree and began advocating for thousands of genocide widows, many of whom had also lost their children. She says her greatest victory was helping shift women’s rights in a country that had long been patriarchal. Rwanda’s surviving population was an astonishing 70% female; women headed a third of all households and produced most of Rwanda’s food supply. But women had no inheritance rights before the genocide. After their husbands’ deaths, the widows were left with nothing.

In concert with women’s organizations, Geraldine pushed for reform. A new inheritance law brought fresh challenges, with thousands of widows filing claims to property and possessions. That concrete step

helped Rwandans and the international community understand that these women weren't just victims; they would be powerful forces in moving Rwanda forward politically, socially, and economically.

In 2001, Geraldine was asked to serve as a technical adviser and help implement a traditional justice system reintroduced to ease the burden on the conventional criminal courts. Gacaca [pronounced ga-cha-cha] means "on the grass," and the open-air meetings bring communities together not only to mete out justice, but also discuss the impact of the genocide.

Geraldine believes that Gacaca is an important step toward reconciliation. Rwandans have never talked openly about deep-rooted conflicts. Geraldine explains: "Gacaca isn't perfect. But it's the best forum for confronting our past, our grievances, and our divisions." The process doesn't necessarily conform to international legal standards, but at least it's dealing with the enormous backlog.

Geraldine is optimistic but expresses concern. Rwanda's one million trials are only the beginning. Many genocide survivors were victims of sexual violence; most are HIV+ but go without medications. Children—so many of them orphans who now head households—lack decent shelter and food. The genocide brought the economy to its knees, plunging most Rwandans even further into poverty; most live on less than a dollar a day.

"The government cannot do everything. It's trying hard but with very limited resources. It's like a small shower in the desert." Geraldine understands her country's needs and is eager to shape its future. Geraldine's eyes light up when she talks about her American education, which she says is "not a personal gift but a gift to Rwanda. It's a treasure for my country." It's a gift she's eager to share.

Back home, Geraldine will reinvest herself in public service, working with the government to decide where her new skills will have the greatest impact. "Anything that can develop Rwanda, I am willing to do," she says firmly. Geraldine dreams of returning to the National University, this time as a professor of law and one of a few women lecturers.

Shaking her head, Geraldine explains that Rwandan students must do everything on their own. But in America, she says, "a student is a queen; a student is a king." She wants to provide direction and guidance to young students, helping them make good choices and encouraging them to make Rwanda stronger. They can look to their teacher's own life for inspiration. Her life may not have a Hollywood ending, but Geraldine has the potential for stardom.