

Thomasena Thomas

Political Science and Public Policy

Communication + Openness = Reconciliation

This past December, I engaged in international missionary work in Rwanda, East Central Africa. While in Rwanda, I was able to learn about reconciliation post the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Since reconciliation is a topic that is prominent even now in our society, I wanted to bring back the knowledge I learned to the College to give a nuanced perspective on how we can reconcile our differences and learn from each other.

The stipend awarded from this grant will be used to pay the rest of my in-country fees. The total cost of my trip was \$2,400. This is broken down into two parts: the flight and the in-country fees. The flight itself was a higher cost, totaling \$1,900, while the in-country fees cost a total of \$500. The in-country fees included my meals, lodging, and the missionary work I engaged in while in the country of Rwanda. I understand that this is a large amount of money, but the trip was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity that allowed for me to gain a deeper understanding of how faith is a strong factor in how a group of people are able to forgive such horrendous crimes done to their own community and country.

While in Rwanda, couple of the organizations with which I worked were Hope On A Thousand Hills and Slum Ministry. Hope On A Thousand Hills works to provide the native people of Rwanda with education, agriculture, and nutrition classes. Slum Ministry supplies women with entrepreneurship classes to further their societal advancement. Though different, the objective of both organizations is the same: to help the people of Rwanda achieve a holistic and sustainable lifestyle.

I had much self-reflection to do upon my return from Rwanda. My biggest takeaway concerned appearance, a major contributing factor to the genocide over twenty years ago. Although the people of Rwanda may differ in physical appearance, knowledge of the nation's past pains has encouraged all citizens to strive for oneness in spite of their differences. The people of Rwanda wanted to build their community back as one instead of Tutsis against Hutus. To me, that was powerful. It is saddening to see that our campus has a hard time reconciling its differences, and we are such a small institution. One would think the College would have a easier time reconciling differences, but this is simply not true. I believe the College needs to move towards reconciling its differences using the Race and Social Justice Initiative's racial equity framework as a guide. Many of the problems that need to be reconciled on our campus are race related. When Rwanda made their race issues a matter of public priority, they were able to end the genocide and find reconciliation. The issues here at the College need to be taken more seriously and seen as a student body issue. Assessing the history of the College, there has been a race related issue on campus for the last four years straight. This is a major problem and needs to be resolved in a way that does not divide the College even more than it already is. Although the reconciliation process in Rwanda was not quick, it started with communication, openness, and forgiveness.

Community statements are a strong component of the *THE STATE OF RACIAL DISPARITIES IN CHARLESTON COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA 2000–2015*. Similarly, Rwanda began the reconciliation process through similar means of community engagement. The Rwandan genocide memorial committee went beyond community statements by acquiring pictures from the families affected by the genocide. Those pictures were used to commemorate

Thomasena Thomas

Political Science and Public Policy

Communication + Openness = Reconciliation

the victims and to tell the unique stories of those who lost their lives. These powerful verbal and photographic memorials made way for reconciliation so the healing process could begin.

Although the College has never experienced a racially charged act of violence of this scale, it would be revolutionary to share the stories of those affected by racism here at the College. By personalizing these injustices, students may come to understand the vital need for reconciliation on campus and in greater society.

For us to have a just and equal institution, we must learn to reconcile with one another.