Unknown Heroes of Rwanda

Stories of rescue from the Rwandan Genocide
Unknown Heroes of Rwanda: Stories of rescue from the Rwandan Genocide

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This booklet has been prepared as a supplement to Courage to Care workshops & programs. The information is based on current publicly available sources, and while all care has been taken and measures put in place to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, we do not represent it as definitive.

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Who are the Unknown Heroes?

Unknown Heroes are those ordinary men and women who demonstrated the ‘courage to care’ by protecting, assisting or sheltering victims of mass genocide. Such tales emerge from the darkest and most horrific events in modern history and are important moments in time upon which to reflect.

Faced with such large-scale brutality, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by the horror. One cannot avoid the inescapable question: how can humans behave so inhumanely towards each other?

The stories of the ‘unknown heroes’ demonstrate that even in the darkest of times there will always be ordinary people who will stand up and place themselves at risk to protect others from prejudice and injustice, racism, bullying and discrimination.

The Unknown Heroes Project

The Unknown Heroes Research Project was launched by Courage to Care NSW to research and share stories of unknown heroes from the genocides of the 20th Century.

This booklet explores the stories of unknown heroes from the Rwandan Genocide. It contains general information about the genocide, profiles of notable heroes, as well as shorter stories of bravery which demonstrate that even ‘ordinary people’ are capable of extraordinary acts.

The aim of this booklet and others in this series is to show the various rescuers as exemplars of ‘upstanders’, inspiring us all to take positive action in the face of prejudice, injustice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

What is Courage to Care?

Courage to Care is a non-profit organisation which aims to inform Australians of the dangers of bullying, discrimination, racism and prejudice through educational programs, exhibitions, workshops and school programs. Courage to Care strives to combat discrimination in all forms by inspiring and empowering each individual to become an
‘upstander’ and take positive action when witnessing prejudice or bullying. Our central message is that every person can make a difference, and that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

A Note to Teachers & Students
Aside from the unknown hero stories, there are additional resources listed in the booklet, including suggested readings, films and websites to read survivors’ accounts. Please note, the additional resources listed may contain disturbing accounts of the genocide and are not intended for all age groups. Teachers should advise younger students as to appropriate resource selection.
Rescuers of the Rwandan Genocide (1994)
Rwanda, a small country in East Africa, bordered by Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, experienced years of unrest and civil war.

In 1994, following the assassination of the country’s president, a mass slaughter of the Tutsi people took place, becoming known as the Rwandan Genocide.

The scale of the genocide was overwhelming; in just four months, an estimate 1 million people were murdered.

The victims were primarily Tutsi men, women and children. Additionally, 10,000 Batwa people were killed (which was 30% of their population in Rwanda).

Stories of the genocide usually focus on the brutal killings that occurred, but there are also stories of courage, kindness and heroism that took place during that dark time.
Captain Mbaye Diagne
‘The Forgotten Angel of Rwanda’

During the Rwandan Genocide, it was Captain Mbaye Diagne’s duty as a United Nations Peacekeeper to report what he saw happening in Rwanda to the UN officials. He was stationed there as an unarmed military observer under strict orders not to actively interfere in any way. However, as Mbaye watched the brutal murder of ordinary Rwandans, he knew he had to intervene and help in some way.

Mbaye was aware that personally helping and getting involved in the Rwandan’s lives would mean he would be deliberately going against the agenda of the UN peacekeeping mission. This, however, did not stop him from taking action. Thankfully, not only did Mbaye’s commander, General Romeo Dallaire, not reprimand him for subordination, but he decided to help Mbaye in his efforts. Mbaye’s bravery, and the bravery of other UN officers, saved between 500-1000 lives, with Mbaye alone saving over 50 lives.

Mbaye was renowned for his wordsmithery, particularly in his use of it for comic effect. He believed that his humour was his strongest ‘weapon’ against the Hutu militia. Mbaye was often able to use his wit to win over these military men into trusting him and allowing him drive his car around the city as he picked up numerous Tutsi locals who were in desperate need of help. He would then drop them off at Hotel des Mille Collines, where many people had sought shelter. Mbaye’s humour also served him well in comforting the refugees he had rescued, as it gave them a moment of relief and brightness.

As a devout Muslim, Mbaye abstained from alcohol or
cigarettes, but he always kept in his car bottles of beer and whisky, as well as packets of cigarettes, to use as bribes for his safety and the safety of his passengers.

Mbaye worked tirelessly to protect the lives of the people he had brought to the hotel, as on several occasions the Interahamwe militia would come and threaten to kill everyone inside. On one such occasion Mbaye shouted back at the militia, ‘you cannot kill these people, they are my responsibility. I will not allow you to harm them – you’ll have to kill me first.’

Tragically, Mbaye was killed on 31 May 1994 when a bomb exploded near his car as he was on his way back to the UN base. His death made a great impact on the many people that he rescued, as well as the dozens of witnesses to his acts of bravery and courage.

Years after Mbaye’s death, General Dellaire recalled how Mbaye was part of a small group who had been willing to risk their lives to save others. ‘He had a sense of humanity that went well beyond orders, well beyond any mandate.’

**Recognition:** In 2014 the UN created the Captain Mbaye Diagne Medal for Exceptional Courage in honour of Mbaye and his bravery during the Rwandan Genocide.

Mbaye with colleagues in Rwanda
Carl Wilkens
‘The Last American in Rwanda’

Carl Wilkens, an American aid worker, was living with his family in Rwanda where he ran a relief agency funded by the Adventist Church at the time of the genocide. Having lived in Rwanda for a number of years, Carl felt strong ties to the country and the people living there.

As the violence in Rwanda began to escalate with each passing day, Carl’s friends and relatives back in the United States urged him and his family to return to America, out of harm’s way. The American government also encouraged them to return, as they reached out to all the Americans living or travelling in the area around that time and offered to help them by arranging safe transport for them out of Rwanda.

Understandably, Carl worried for the safety of him and his family, but, despite this, he decided to stay behind in Rwanda to make sure his Rwandan friends of Tutsi descent remained safe. As the rest of the Americans hurriedly packed their bags and left for safety, Carl soon found himself the last American living in Rwanda.

Who were the Interhamwe?

During the Rwandan Genocide, the ‘Interhamwe’, a Hutu militia group, carried out much of the killings the country. This militant group was able to rapidly gain power during this time, setting up radio stations to broadcast hateful propaganda against the Tutsis, and encouraging ordinary Hutu citizens to kill their Tutsi neighbours and relatives.
In the first three weeks Carl remained in Rwanda, the city of Kigali was in lock-down, with the only people out on the streets being the Hutu militias and occasional looters. Once the city leaders assured residents that it was safe to walk outside, Carl began searching for local people he knew to ascertain they were alive. As Carl searched, he witnessed the destruction and havoc that the Hutu militia had wrought upon the city. Carl was determined to help the survivors who remained. He helped the Red Cross to distribute food, water and aid supplies to survivors, while also helping to look after the children at some of the orphanages in the surrounding areas.

One day, Carl was at the Gisimbia orphanage when he saw a large militia group approaching. One child told Carl that the militia had come back to ‘finish us all off today’ (the same men had visited there the previous day and killed several of the children). Knowing he could not stand by while this killing took place, Carl went out looking for someone with authority to prevent the massacre to petition for the children to be spared. Thankfully, he heard that Hutu prime minister of Rwanda, Jean Kambanda, was

As The World Watched

While thousands of people were being slaughtered every day in Rwanda, the world leaders stood by idly and watched. Although the United Nations had unanimously declared genocide to be a crime under international law, their silence during this harrowing time was deafening. When the United Nations eventually decided to intervene it was not until the very end of the genocide, after the most murderous period has died down. Had they intervened sooner, thousands of more lives would have been saved.
visiting nearby. Carl mustered the courage to approach the man who was still involved in orchestrating the genocide to ask him to spare the lives of the children at the orphanage. Prime Minister Kambanda agreed that the children would be spared. With this brave act, Carl saved the lives of the remaining children in the orphanage.

Carl later reflected on this surprising outcome and how, paradoxically, even individuals who had committed evil still had the capacity for good.

After the genocide ended, Carl spent another year and a half in Rwanda helping the country during their process of rebuilding the country.

When Carl returned to the United States, he made it his mission to travel around the United States to share his story with others, and to urge people to make sure that their own communities and elected officials did all they could to prevent further genocides.

**Recognition:** To commemorate Carl for his humanitarian acts during the Rwandan genocide, he received several awards, including the 2005 Medal of Valor from the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

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**The Tutsi and Hutu**

When Belgium colonised Rwanda in 1919, to help distinguish between the native Rwandans, it began popularising the Tutsi-Hutu divide along socioeconomic lines (the Belgians declared cattle owners to be ‘Tutsi’ and farmers to be ‘Hutu’). Over time, the terms ‘Tutsi and Hutu’ were treated as racial identifiers. Although the Tutsis were the minority race in the country, making up only 15% of the population, they were favoured by the Belgians because of their more ‘European’ characteristics, which fostered resentment towards them among the Hutu people.
Father Eros Borile  
‘Protector of the Orphans’

Eros Borile had been working in Rwanda since 1987 as a Catholic priest on behalf of the Italian Ecclesial Center for Africa and Asia. In 1992, he assumed the role of Director of Saint Antoine Orphanage in Nyanza. As the Genocide spread, many priests fled the country for safety. Father Borile was warned by his church council in Italy that it was unsafe for him to remain in the country, and they begged him to leave. However, Borile chose to remain and protect the 140 children at the orphanage who would be in danger if he left.

As the genocide continued, children who escaped the violence from various parts of Rwanda sought refuge at the orphanage and were welcomed by Father Borile.

The fighting reached Nyanza on 22 April, and the shooting and screaming could be heard in the afternoons. One day, a small group of soldiers arrived at the orphanage, instructing Father Borile not to allow anyone seek

How did the Genocide End?

The genocide in Rwanda lasted 100 days and was eventually brought to an end when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (currently the ruling political party in Rwanda), with the help of Uganda’s army, successfully defeated the Interhamwe and seized control of the country.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the National Republic Movement for Democracy and Development (NRMD), the party which founded the Interhamwe, was outlawed and in 2003, a new constitution was drafted which eradicated references to ethnicity in the hope of preventing further racial genocides.
refuge in his centre. They also demanded to check the identity of all those in the centre. The soldiers even lied, stating that they were only attempting to return the children to their parents. Seeing through the ruse, Father Borile hastily changed the list of names of the children who had escaped the genocide with names of children who had stayed at the centre in the past. Then he convinced the soldiers to leave.

Within a few weeks, the number of children staying at the centre swelled to 820. The soldiers again visited the orphanage, and again, thanks to Father Borile, they left without incident.

Years later, Father Borile recalled how hundreds of children were unable to speak after witnessing the killings. During lunchtime, the hundreds of silent children created a very eerie atmosphere.

Toward the genocide’s end, Father Borile fell ill, and although he needed to fly home to Italy to be treated, he refused to go until another priest was sent to take his place at the orphanage.

Thanks to his efforts, over 800 lives were saved. Father Borile returned to Rwanda and continued to run the orphanage until 2014.

**Recognition:** In 2011, Father Borile was inducted into the Garden of the Righteous in Padua, Italy. In 2015, he was a recipient of Rwanda’s Unity Award.
Ordinary People, Extraordinary Acts

Enoch Rwanburindi

Enoch was a kind man who went out of his way to provide refuge for his Tutsi neighbours by inviting them into his home to shelter them and cater to their wounds during the persecution of their people. When his home became too crowded, Enoch built a separate house for them to make sure they would all fit. Every time the local authorities called on Enoch to throw the refugees out of his home he refused, telling them that he could not do that to God’s people.

Josephine Dusabimana

When Josephine heard the screams and gunshots of Tutsis in her area being rounded up and murdered, she resolved to help those that had escaped death and offered them refuge in her home. However, Josephine soon realised that she could not house many people in her little home and decided to borrow a canoe from her native village to help some of the refugees get to Congo, where they would be safer. In order to hide the canoe paddles from the local militia who would confiscate such items and have her beaten or even killed for possessing them, Josephine broke the paddles into two pieces hid them in sweet potato leaves so she could tell passersby that she was simply growing sweet potatoes. In this clever way Josephine was able to help save the lives of several people.
Sister Helene Nayituliki

Sister Helene Nayituliki was a head teacher at a Catholic-run school called Rwamagana Nursing School. During the genocide, she protected many of her fellow teachers, students, and residents of neighbouring areas, by housing them in the dormitories at the school and patrolling the school grounds on the lookout for any sign of soldiers. She provided everyone with daily food, bedding and clothing. When pressure from the militia to kick the refugees out began to increase, Sister Helene safely rounded up everyone under her care and ferried them by trucks to take them to a safer convent, dressing those that could pass off as students in school uniforms, so they could appear to be her students.

Zula Karuhimbi

It is said by Rwandans that Zula Karuhimbi rescued over 150 people using traditional medicine and ‘sorcery’ to save and protect lives during the Tutsi genocide. When the killing took place, Zula sheltered people fleeing violence, hiding them in her home. She covered those fleeing the militias with piles of dry leaves and baskets. Whenever Zula sensed that the local militia were nearby, she would quickly coat her hands in a special herb that would cause them to blister and turn red. When the soldiers arrived, Zula grabbed them with her blistered hands and the soldiers, fearing they would be cursed, quickly left her home. In this way, Zula saved many people from certain death. Years later, Zula received Rwanda’s 2006 Campaign against Genocide Medal for her bravery and was inducted into the Garden of the Righteous in Milan, Italy in 2009.
Sources


Muvunyi, Steven. ‘Unity Award recipients to be recognised today’. The New Times. 6 November 2015. www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/194162


**Photo Credits**

‘Mbaye Diagne’. *BBC News*.

‘Mbaye Diagne with colleagues’. *International Policy Digest*.

‘Carl Wilkens’. *Dallas Holocaust Museum*.


Further Resources*

Books:
- *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* by Jean Hatzfield (2007)
- *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* by Philip Gourevitch (1998)

Films and Television:
- *Hotel Rwanda* (2004)**
- *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2007)

Survivor Accounts:
- Genocide Archive of Rwanda: [www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw](http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw)  
  o The archive also contains testimonies from rescuers.

*Additional resources may contain intense accounts of the genocide and may not be suitable for all age groups; younger students should consult with their teacher for appropriate resource selection.

**While the popular film, *Hotel Rwanda*, has received wide coverage, the account portrayed in the film is disputed by a number of Rwandan survivors (see Inside Hotel Rwanda by Edouard Kayihura).*
What have we learned?

**Learning from history:** What challenges did the heroes in these rescue stories face? Are there elements of these stories relevant to situations experienced by students in Australia today — at home, at school and in the community?

**Developing empathy:** What basic elements of human nature can be observed in the actions of the heroes, the victims and the perpetrators in these stories?

**Taking personal responsibility:** What were some of the difficult choices faced by the heroes in these stories? How were these choices affected by personal background, other individuals, families and communities?

**Appreciating and welcoming diversity:** What reflections on the concepts of tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance can be gleaned from these stories? How has the acceptance of cultural diversity become part of a modern, democratic society, like Australia?
What does it take to be a hero?

What is hero? We typically think of someone with extraordinary abilities, rescuing people who face danger, but is this really the case?

At Courage to Care, our programs refer to rescuers during genocide calling them ‘upstanders.’ In referring to genocide, the general tendency is to focus on the perpetrators and the victims, the people doing the killing and those being killed. But there are also bystanders who witness the killings and do nothing to protect victims. And finally, there are the real heroes who stand up to injustice and help where they can.

At the heart of the Courage to Care program is the lesson we can learn from the most significant events of the 20th century, the genocides, teaching all of us a universal precept: one person can make a difference, and even ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

Their stories are an enduring example of the power of the individual to make a difference, and a poignant reminder that it is our own choices that determine if we remain bystanders, or become upstanders who take positive action in the face of prejudice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

The message of Courage to Care is to be aware of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, and to strive to combat discrimination in all forms by inspiring and empowering the individual to become an upstander and take positive action.

Being an upstander means being a hero in your own private life, even if no one will learn how your actions made a difference in someone else’s life.

Being an upstander is part of everyday life, not just in times of great turmoil, like a genocide. Standing up and speaking out takes courage and compassion.

In what areas in your life can you make a difference?

What does it take for you to be an upstander?
Learn More

To learn more about Courage to Care, go to our website at:
www.couragetocare.com.au

Additional resource materials and links are available on our website:

Student Resources: www.couragetocare.com.au/students

Do you have feedback you’d like to share about the stories in this booklet?

Please email us at: info@couragetocare.com.au