By Chaplain Clementina M. Chéry

As you might know, I have been selected as a 2017 BARR Fellow, along with 10 other amazing and thoughtful leaders throughout the City of Boston. This is a bittersweet opportunity that I believe comes from God, shedding another light on the survivors of homicide victims community. This BARR Fellowship gave me the opportunity to travel to Kigali, Rwanda in February of this year as part of "The Learning Journey." This Journey was designed to build relationship among all of the Fellows while immersing us in collective, challenging growth exercises, and offer inspiration through exchanges with leaders from the Rwandan community who are working to improve lives in their country.

In Kigali, I witnessed how people of color have come together to heal in the aftermath of an unthinkable tragedy: the Rwandan genocide of 1994, where more than 500,000 Rwandan people were murdered. It was here that I saw the Principles of Peace - love, unity, faith, courage, justice, forgiveness, and, especially, hope - in action. We spent 10 days of learning and for the sake of this journal I want to share with you a place and experience that moved my heart.

In many ways, Rwanda reminded me of my home country, Honduras, Central America. More specifically, traveling the roads of Kigali felt quite like my childhood experiences in rural Honduras and my hometown, Trovador. Growing up, I had food and shelter. I had family and faith, I had culture and community. By some definitions, I was "poor," yet I didn't necessarily identify that way.

I, along with the other Fellows, traveled to Les Enfants de Dieu, which translates to "The Children of God." This organization's mission is "to transform the lives of Rwandan street children by meeting their basic and psychosocial needs, providing them with education..."
and skills, and reintegrating them to become valuable members of society."

When I first heard of this center, I already imagined what I would encounter - an environment similar to youth detention centers in the United States, many of which aim to "repair" young people, and are not always places conducive for children to grow in ways that are healthy or incorporate healing as part of their journey. The physical appearance of the center, with its concrete walls and floors, also reminded me of numerous juvenile centers here in the states.

I think subconsciously, because of these preconceptions, that I initially shut myself off from emotionally connecting with many of the young boys at Les Enfants de Dieu.

However, what I heard and saw in action and after spending time reflecting with the other fellows completely changed all of that.

Notably, the children elect from amongst themselves ministers of administration, home affairs, education, health and social affairs. According to the organization's website, each ministry works together with relevant staff members (e.g. teachers, nurse, social workers) to come up with objectives for the year. They work together to achieve those goals. For example, a minister of health together with the nurse may decide that they want to reduce malaria prevalence by 80% in 6 months. They will then proceed to purchase mosquito nets and eliminate stagnant water, etc.

The minister and his team will also be involved in making day to day decisions in their departments, and meet regularly to discuss issues that they face. They also hold certain responsibilities such as approving purchases before they are authorized. The effects of this governance model have been astounding. Firstly, the children feel ownership of the project and their participation towards improving the programs are high, increasing the chances of success. Secondly, the children learn useful skills such as leadership, management and how to take responsibility. Finally the system increases transparency and accountability, as the beneficiaries themselves are aware of all activities and transactions that take place at the center.

Often times, I have witnessed young boys and children here in the United States of America being demonized and given labels all too quickly. How many times have you heard the terms "at-risk" "impact player" or "gang member?" Here, in Kigali, I wondered: imagine if our system gave our young people titles, roles, and responsibilities - a minister of education, a minister of sports, a president, a clerk, and minister of finance. Imagine giving children the sense of hope and drive by having them hold office. Where many young people, often survivors of homicide victims or the perpetrators, have a hard time coping with trauma, how much would they stand to benefit from being entrusted with responsibility and granted self-respect?
I also realized how quickly we judge others' circumstances. By looking at the outward appearance of the facility, I assumed, from my experience in youth facilities, that there would be a lot of sadness and gloom. I could not begin to imagine what lied within the walls of the organization: children being treated with dignity and respect and empowered to be their best selves, despite their circumstances.

I also came to realize the significance of the name of the facility itself. This could’ve been named anything - ‘the Center for Troubled Youth’ or ‘Facility of Rehabilitation,’ or a Home for Street Children for example. Yet by naming it "The Children of God," the adults are (intentionally) saying that these young people deserve God’s love, just like all children, regardless of whether they’ve run away from home, have caused harm or experienced harm themselves.

Instead of denying myself the opportunity to be present in and experience the joy of these children, simply because of my own "stuff," I instead was able to witness 'hope' in action. This became a place for me to experience this specific Principles of Peace in an environment outside of what is familiar.

My professional and personal mission are interconnected: To transform the way that all families are treated in the aftermath of a homicide, regardless of their circumstances. This experience taught me how to apply the seven principles of peace regardless of the circumstances. I hope that, in reading this, many of you can also challenge yourselves to find ways and places that the Principles of Peace can be applied in your lives and the lives of others.

Through the Fellowship, I also have the opportunity to go on sabbatical for three months from June-September 2018. This will give me the time and space to reflect and focus on my personal journey of being an Agent of God’s Peace in Love, Unity, Faith, Hope, Courage, Justice and Forgiveness. This is an honor, a privilege and a testament to the mission of The Peace Institute that serves as a center of healing, teaching and learning for families and communities impacted by murder, trauma, grief and loss.

Kigali Memorial Center: The Gigahi Genocide Memorial is the final resting place for more than 250,000 victims of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. It honors the memory of Rwandans killed in 1997 through education and peace building.
The work continues! As I am blessed to have this opportunity, I know it would not be possible without the commitment and grace of my team, The Board of Directors and your commitment and investment in the mission of the Peace Institute. Our advocates will continue to do the work in serving families on both sides of homicide.

Leadership Team:
Rachel A. Rodrigues *(middle)* will serve as Interim Executive Director. Rachel has been at the Peace Institute for 12 years, started out as a college intern organizing the Mother’s Day Walk for Peace. She organized and facilitated the group M’MOMs (Massachusetts Mothers on the Move), a group of mothers with incarcerated sons. Rachel served families immediately after a homicide and has built the Survivors Outreach Services Program.

Milton W. Jones *(left)* will serve as Director of Operations. Milton started as a volunteer 12 years ago, has served families immediately after a homicide and co-facilitates Peace from Within, a peace-building and mindfulness group for incarcerated men. Milton makes sure the Peace Institute is available and accessible as a safe space to all who enter.

Alexandra A. Chéry *(right)* is stepping into the role as Director of Programs. Alexandra has grown up in the Peace Institute and some of you may know her as Louis’ little sister (or Little Tina). Alexandra has served on the Board of Directors of the Peace Institute, developed programs for sibling survivors, ran young survivors groups in schools, organizes the Survivors of Homicide Victims Awareness month and is building the Massachusetts Survivors of Homicide Victims Network.

Under their direction, our team will continue to serve, advocate and train. I thank all of you for supporting, consulting, sponsoring, partnering and investing in the center of healing, teaching and learning.

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