

# Shared Learning in Rwanda

A relationship with the University of Rwanda adds richness and diversity to Kent State's study abroad programs.

BY LISA ABRAHAM

Kent State's entry into Rwanda, Africa, not only opens a new market for international students at the university, but also contributes to the university's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

Sarah Schmidt, assistant director of global education initiatives at Kent State University at Stark and an instructor in the School of Peace and Conflict Studies, will take a third group of students to Rwanda for a summer study abroad program in 2023.

One of the things that has most impressed her about the trips so far is the diversity among the students who go. More than 55% of her 2022 cohort were students of color—a percentage she says is unheard of for most study abroad trips. "It's something our students care about; they want diversity."

Schmidt's 2022 study abroad course, Rwanda After the Genocide Against the Tutsi, focused on the genocide in which nearly 1 million members of the Tutsi were killed by members of the government-backed Hutu militias from April to July 1994.

Following the tragedy, the country faced the monumental task of reconciliation and rebuilding. The result is a country focused on peace education, beginning at the earliest levels of primary school and continuing through university and beyond.

As with most Kent State collaborations in Rwanda, the driving force behind the summer study abroad program, Schmidt says, was Pacifique Niyonzima, MEd '19, now a doctoral candidate in interprofessional leadership at the College of Education, Health and Human Services.

Niyonzima, a genocide survivor, came to the United States for schooling in 2011. In 2018, he was looking for a capstone project to complete his master's degree in higher education administration. Someone suggested he contact Schmidt, whose research specialty is international peace and conflict resolution.

Taking Kent State students to Rwanda to learn about the genocide and the country's subsequent determination to become a model for peace and conflict resolution was Niyonzima's vision after he returned to his homeland in 2018 for an internship at the University of Rwanda. "Rwanda is a good place to be now," he says, "and I am excited about how this partnership will progress."

Schmidt says it was easy to get enthusiastic about the project, and she and Niyonzima mapped out a plan with Kent State Stark history professor Leslie Heaphy, PhD. Heaphy designed a study abroad course on the history of genocide that provided structure for the 10-day trip. They took 13 students to Rwanda over spring break 2019. After two years' hiatus due to the pandemic, 11 students went on the trip in 2022. Schmidt is accepting applications for 2023.

After the 2019 trip, Schmidt and Niyonzima began brainstorming on how to expand the program into a full-fledged study abroad class that also would involve students from the University of Rwanda. "It has laid the groundwork for what will become a summer institute in Kigali and an annual program," she says.

Teaming up with University of Rwanda students for shared learning experiences and social

**Above:** Claude Mugabe, Kigali Genocide Memorial facilitator, speaks to students from Kent State and the University of Rwanda during their visit to the memorial.

**Teaming up with University of Rwanda students for shared learning experiences and social gatherings added an important dimension to the 2022 study abroad program.**

gatherings added an important dimension to the 2022 study abroad program. Near the end of the trip, Schmidt and two Kent State students took part in a virtual panel discussion to share what they had learned in the 3-credit-hour course.

"It's been an amazing experience," said Mariah Fannin, a Kent State senior from Massillon, Ohio, studying secondary social studies education. "From a historical perspective, I really enjoyed hearing the perspectives of the Rwandan people. We visited all these ministries and government offices as well as a small reconciliation village where we got to hear the perceptions and stories of people who actually lived through the genocide of the Tutsi in 1994. That was really impactful."

Kellie Rose Kordinak, a Kent State junior from Mogadore, Ohio, studying Arabic translation and

history, described interacting with the University of Rwanda students. "In our initial meeting with them, we talked about all our interdisciplinary fields, and these are some of the most intelligent colleagues I've ever had. And being able to go out on the town with them and experience Kigali and Rwanda in general with them was amazing."

Studying the genocide and post-genocide reconstruction with people who lived through it is powerful academic content that students can't get in a traditional classroom, Schmidt says. And what stuck with the students, she says, were the relationships they formed and the bonds they made with their classmates. ⚡

*To apply for the 2023 summer institute, which will be a 6-credit-hour course, contact Sarah Schmidt at [sschmi16@kent.edu](mailto:sschmi16@kent.edu).*

**Left:** PeacEdu community members—genocide survivors and former perpetrators who confessed their role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and were forgiven—share testimonies about their journey of reconciliation with students from Kent State and the University of Rwanda. Courtesy PeacEdu



Scan the QR code to read more about the 2019 Kent State University at Stark student trip to Rwanda.

**Left:** In a classroom in Kigali, Pacifique Niyonzima, MEd '19, takes a selfie with Kent State and University of Rwanda students and co-instructor Sarah Schmidt, assistant director of global education initiatives at Kent State University at Stark and instructor of peace and conflict studies.