

LOCALS DOING GOOD

SHIFTING GEARS TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

The paths of a Rwandan orphan and Breck local intertwine in a story of hope and forgiveness. BY KATE LAPIDES

“No one had to say it. I knew it as soon as the machete struck: the loss of my hands would forever change my life. From the moment I woke up until I fell asleep at night — every single day — I was so painfully aware of what those men had taken from me.”

WHEN THE THOUGHT ABOVE first flowed through Frederick Ndabaramiye’s mind in 1998, he was a 15-year-old Rwandan teenager who had just had his hands sawn off by a machete. The irreversible life change he envisioned at the time was a future filled with dependence, helplessness, and despair.

Four years after the devastating 1994 Rwandan genocide in which an estimated 800,000 of Ndabaramiye’s countrymen were slaughtered, Interahamwe rebel militia groups still terrorized Rwanda by staging attacks inside the country from their camps in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo. Ndabaramiye was traveling through Rwanda in 1998 when the bus he was riding on was ambushed by one of these groups. They bound up the arms of Ndabaramiye and the other passengers and beat them with spears and clubs for hours. Then, the militia singled him out, handed him a machete, and ordered him to kill his fellow travelers. When he refused, telling them his God wouldn’t let him do that, the militia told him they were going to give him a message to take back to the people instead. Then they killed the other bus passengers in front of him, pinned his arms to a log, and hacked off his hands with a dull machete.

Fast forward to June 2015. Ndabaramiye is speaking to a packed house at Colorado Mountain College in Breckenridge. He’s on a small speaking tour accompanying several Colorado screenings of *I Am Able*, a recent documentary on his life. Ndabaramiye is sharing a powerful message with the audience, but it’s not the one the militia intended back in 1998. The teenager whose spirit they hoped to permanently crush—and who was once filled with such painful despair—has become a vibrant, resilient and hope-filled man. He’s also a talented painter, and co-founder of the Ubumwe Community Center, which works to empower fellow Rwandans living with disabilities. A powerful and inspirational speaker, he has shared his life story in a TedX talk, on ABC Primetime, and in the co-authored biography *Frederick, A Story of Boundless Hope*, by Amy Parker. He’s also a skilled no-handed bicyclist who joyfully rides throughout Rwanda with fellow disabled cyclists as part of the I Am Able Cycling team to raise disability awareness among incredulous rural Rwandan villagers.



For Ndabaramiye, the journey to empowerment began with the psychic and emotional healing that started when he went to live at the Imbabazi Orphanage in Gisenyi, Rwanda, a year after his horrific encounter. With the support of orphanage director Rosamond Carr and the orphanage children, Ndabaramiye began to rediscover a life purpose, and relearned how to eat, bathe and dress himself without the use of hands.

It’s also where he met Frisco resident Christie Abel, in 2002, when she was working at the orphanage on a six-month stint as a volunteer.

“When I first met Frederick,” remembers Abel, “he had already ‘re-learned’ how to smile. He was also learning to draw, determined to be an artist or a photographer. As I watched his drawings progress and his passion for holding my camera, I knew he had found something that touched him on a soul level. All the kids of the Imbabazi looked up to him. He had an indomitable spirit that was somewhat contagious.”

Such indomitable spirit was in dire need at Imbabazi, where “the children’s stories of the genocide broke your heart,” says Abel. “Many of these children witnessed their families and friends being murdered with machetes... But, when you visited the orphanage, you’d never know that they lived through such horror. It was full of some of the most beautiful smiles, and much joy and laughter.”

When Ndabaramiye shares the story of his horrific experience in Rwanda, he follows it with the story of a second, subsequent, life-altering

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