

## **ATOP Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Healing, Peace-building, and Mind-Body-Eco-Spirit Mission to Africa: Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi**

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### **27 June – 15 July Press Release**

On June 29th, 2013 the ATOP Meaningfulworld Humanitarian peace building, empowerment and healing team arrived in East Africa for a Mental Health Outreach Program organized in Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi. Our team of volunteers came together from US, Canada, Rwanda, and Kenya, all trained in the 7-Step Humanitarian Integrative Healing Model through the Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) Meaningfulworld, an international humanitarian organization affiliated with the United Nations. ATOP has been working in Africa for over 5 years, including in Sierra Leone, Kenya, Rwanda, and DR Congo. This year we have added Burundi.

The humanitarian outreach program will continue this work through healing circles, peace building workshops, empowering lectures and training programs, building on similar programs conducted in the past several years. These programs include providing young people with tools and guidance; working with women to transform their trauma; working with older adults and sharing tools for self-healing and encouraging them to find deeper meaning in their last stage of development; and working with the men to help them transform their generational trauma, as well as empowering them to share their feelings and work harmoniously with women.

Members of the ATOP Meaningfulworld Team include: Dr. Ani Kalayjian (president and founder of ATOP Meaningfulworld), Victoria Alexander (Intern, ATOP Meaningfulworld), Leysa Cerswell (Secretary, ATOP Meaningfulworld), Haik Kocharian (award winning filmmaker and photographer), and Rita Alexander (Registered Pharmacist at Queens Hospital Center).

#### **June 29th 2013, Kwangware, Kenya**

The Meaningfulworld team worked at Kwangware, a slum in Nairobi, Kenya that holds over 500,000 people. In the morning, we worked with the Youth Volunteers for Change (YVC) group led by Benjamin Mwenda. Close to 80 people participated ranging in ages 16 to 34. Each one of these young men and women were remarkably insightful, forthcoming, and intelligent. Nearly all of them have either completed some schooling, are currently attending school, or are planning to attend in the future. When asked to comment or give examples on *The Four Agreements* by Miguel Ruiz, many of them were eager to join the discussion and shared their experiences and insight. Many were excited to stand up and partake in the chakra balancing exercises. Once we completed the exercises, we joined in heart-to-heart-circle of gratitude and love. During this circle, many of the YVC members shared their comments and expressed their joy and happiness to our team. They were thanking us for traveling to their homes in the slums and working with them, and we thanked them for their everyday strength and courage. When asked to share, one of the participants said “wow, this is amazing.” They continued to add that workshops, such as ours, don’t happen often, and how appreciative they were; while for us, their participation alone was an inspiration.

Some of the stressors and challenges that the young people faced were problems with their families, street life as orphans, vehicle accidents, their houses burning down, skirmishes in school, relationship issues, violence due to past political election in 2007, death of loved ones, and many other challenges that they face on a daily basis.

Later in the day we had scheduled a workshop with the women in that same area of Kwangware. Over 30 women attended the healing session where their pain and trauma was transformed, not transferred. They shared their stories of health difficulties and being internally displaced (currently living in



IDP camps) in 2007, due to post-election political violence. Other women lost their houses due to fire, and some were kidnapped and sent away from their homes. Many of these instances were due to conflicts between Kikuyu and Luo, just two of the over 42 tribes in Kenya.

During this session many of these women shared their stories and released a tremendous amount of anger, pain, sadness, fear and frustration. We discussed how children grow up learning that their group “doesn’t interact” with the other group, which creates conflict, distance and often hate between the two groups. Many were reminded that love and forgiveness are instrumental in peace building, beginning with inner peace, and that forgiveness isn’t a gift to someone else, but a gift to oneself. Some women wanted to know how to forget the atrocities they faced, and Dr. Ani reminded them that by forgiving we do not forget. Rather we change the way we remember our suffering by developing a deeper positive meaning. It is important not to forget but to remember all of the positive lessons learned, while we commit to being change agents.

#### **June 30, 2013, Kwangware, Kenya**

On June 30th, 2013 the team worked again in Kwangware with a group of elders. We worked with the KARIKA group, which stands for Kenyan Aged People Require Information and Knowledge. The members of this group were grandmothers and grandfathers who cared for their orphan grandchildren in the slum, as their children have died of AIDS. A dozen of dedicated women and one man gathered to acquire more knowledge on healing. This group had difficulties with their physical health due to their age and lack of medical services available. One of the women shared, “when you’re a single mother, you suffer a lot, and you don’t even know when you are sick.” They described their physical limitations often leading them to feelings of pain, sadness, then anger and frustration. We discussed how physical pain can lead to emotional pain and sadness, but that this sadness doesn’t relieve the physical pain, it only makes it worse, creating a second problem. Reframing, and changing one’s attitude was described and shared, which was welcomed by the participants.

The group described some tools they could use to overcome these challenges. During this part of the day many of the women spoke about the importance of self-love, hope, and ‘to walk by faith and not by sight.’

Following the healing workshop, the team initiated a neighborhood aesthetic beautification program with over 25 local children. Those involved were at a crucial age for learning, which made it beneficial for our team to instruct and train in useful cleaning techniques, to stress the importance of maintaining cleanliness in the neighborhood area, and the reasons why caring for ecology will help communities to heal.

#### **July 1st, 2013, Kenya, University of Nairobi**

On July 1st, 2013, ATOP Meaningfulworld team was invited to present on Engendering Inner Peace through Forgiveness and Meaning Making at the University of Nairobi. Upon arrival we met with Professor Priscilla and discussed future collaborations between the University and Meaningfulworld. We



also introduced our local collaborators to one another, especially Benjamin Mwenda and the Youth Volunteers for Change in Kwangware. Through this connection the university has begun sending student teams to continue our outreach and healing programs in Kwangwar

Over 150 psychology students and faculty attended the lecture at the University of Nairobi, with standing room only. Dr. Ani asked the attendees to take an oath of peace and the

students and faculty raised their right hands and placed their left on their hearts and in unison repeated: 'war stops with me and peace begins with me.' Dr. Ani discussed horizontal violence, which was an unfamiliar phenomenon. She reminded them that anger and oppression from the government and political parties coming from the top down, would make their anger explode outwards horizontally, hurting and causing suffering to their brothers and sisters.

Dr. Ani drew upon the example of Martin Luther King Jr. and his "I have a dream" speech then asked about their future dreams, as well as what steps they are going to take to actualize their dreams. Although hesitant at first, the students had plenty to share. One male student dreamt that other Kenyan youth would choose their careers based on their passion and not based on the potential earning power. Another mentioned his desire to lead the country as a future president. Expressions of dreams continued where male and female students shared their dreams for the unity of Africans, importance of special needs awareness, and to have a female president. Initially women were not forthcoming without Dr. Ani's encouragement and insistence that we will take turns in sharing between genders.

Finally, after some much needed chakra balancing exercises, which was welcomed by all, our program ended with a meditation session. This was the first for almost all and some shared feelings of euphoria, like a 'burden was lifted,' "like it wasn't me," as others felt 'fresh,' and 'feeling of flying.' The team collaborated with several of the students and made plans for them to join in future trainings. The students as well as administration stated that they will plan for longer workshops next year. The concept of a 'Forgiveness Garden' was introduced, which was welcomed with excitement. The grounds were surveyed and the place decided, identifying a spot right by the Gandhi Wing and the Psychology Department. Our team committed to continuing collaboration for the creation of this garden, which is the first for Kenya. The opening will be next July.

Meaningfulworld has been initiating Forgiveness and Peace Gardens around the world in Jordan, Lebanon, Haiti, Kenya, and Rwanda.

### **July 2nd, 2013, Kabiria and Kangemi, Kenya**

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, our team continued our peace-building and healing mission by joining the Mama Kids Community Center in Kabiria. We were welcomed by the joyous faces of close to 100 adorable children, many of had the effects of sadness and trauma, and others seemed malnourished. The children drew pictures depicting places and things that made them happy and feel safe. Many of them drew cats, houses, and soccer balls while the older group drew footballs and oatmeal filled jugs. The

children were hungry and we were told that many were fed only rice while at school and possibly only once a day. We quickly provided the teachers with much food and supplies as we had on us.

After visiting each classroom, listening to the children individually, we gathered in the center, which held grades from nursery to 7<sup>th</sup>. After being welcomed by their beautiful songs, the team did a role play on how to cope with conflict, and how to forgive. When we asked the children 'what does peace mean to you?' and what words they used to describe peace? some of them responded: forgiveness, respect, and love, while others focused on being obedient to teachers and parents. This was especially a



challenging experience for our team, because we learned that it only costs \$350 annually to receive education and food, and how many of them were forced to drop out and often never be able to return. Immediately, our team placed a call on Facebook to raise awareness and asking for sponsorship. This



sum will be a tax-deduction for donors, as ATOP is a charitable organization.

In the afternoon the team traveled to Kangemi, another slum area, to work with close to 15 counselors, who support over 3,000 women, children and families affected by HIV. This inspiring group of professionals works extremely hard to provide hope and resilience. The families they support face challenges, such as domestic violence and shared examples of how most violence occurs when the HIV is denied by husbands, and domestic violence follows as wives are beaten when they try to seek treatment for their family.

**(Photo above) Survivors in Peaceful Warrior position**



**Ubuntu Circle of Unity and Oneness**

### **July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, City Center, Kenya**

On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 the group met with the Youth Volunteers for Change staff and Board member, in the City Center of Nairobi, to provide a comprehensive training of the 7-step Integrative Healing Model. Many of the students who attended the initial training in Kawangware returned for the lecture on Engendering Inner Peace Through Forgiveness and Meaning-Making. This was a much more intimate

session consisting of a balanced mixture of men and women. We put the participants in a circle to face one another as we began with the meditation and healing process. Meditation was a new experience for many of them. Some felt a cold sensation, some felt very relaxed, others discovered their meaning, or found their inner strength. They realized that meditation filled a hole inside of them and allowed their mind and body to work together in harmony.

The group was then asked to share their dreams and the changes they wished to see happen in the world and within their communities. Their dreams were: for a poverty free Kenya with a lowered crime rate, for 100% of Kenyans to utilize their voting rights for all politicians to be held accountable, for Kenya to be one of the most developed countries, for all Kenyan children to receive a free primary education and for Kenya to be free of corruption. Dr. Ani then asked them to think about what steps they can take to achieve these dreams, and noted that “real change starts within, and outer change takes time because generations need to embrace the change.”

Then Leysa and Victoria led the group through the 7-step Integrative Healing Model educating the participants on the importance of the healing process especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, empathy and validation. When one of the participants shared a personal trauma and hurtful event that she had experienced, the group began to incorporate love and empathy towards one another. Our team assisted the youth in maintaining focus, the importance of sitting with the negative feeling, comparing it to a poison that needed to be released in order to heal. Some of the challenges were jumping into giving advice and asking one another to rely on the power of God and prayer. We reinforced that giving advice is not healthy at this point, when the person is expressing their negative feelings, that they need time for release and then they will discover their own unique lessons.

We concluded the day with specific exercises to release tension and stress held in the body by activating different chakras. During heart-to-heart gratitude and love circle, many of the youth shared their desire to continue monthly group meetings practicing the 7-step model long after our departure, and we made commitments to join them via Skype for supervision.

### July 5th, 2013 – Nyagatare, Rwanda



We traveled to meet with youth (about 3 hours distance from Kigali) at the Nyagatare Secondary School, which was founded in 2000 and currently has 900 students. We discussed the genocide curriculum, were told that it is taught in history class. Although teachers try to encourage youth to discuss peace building and the history of the genocide in class, but admitted that these conversations are still very difficult.

They are trying to see themselves as a United Rwanda, without mentioning words Hutu and Tutsi, which is still part of their identity. Youth participate in clubs at the school, like the Peace and Love Proclaimers (PLP). The PLP is made up of 60 students,

developing a kitchen garden, and when hearing of our Forgiveness Garden initiative, they decided to merge the two. Other clubs include the Unity and Reconciliation Group, which brings together youth who are in the midst of conflict, in order to help them transform conflict peacefully, as well as the Student Survivors Association, which was established quickly following the genocide. This group enacts family role playing, taking on responsibility and catering to students whose parents are killed in the genocide, in order to ensure family connection. April used to be called the “milk month,” in Rwanda, however following the genocide it is called the “blood month.”

During the workshop, students discussed ways



they diffuse and process their anger. These include: walking away from the conflict; considering the consequences before they act; and singing in order to change their negative feelings. Students were incredibly inspiring in their collective vision for a peaceful Rwanda, in which young people take action to create the change they wish to see in their country.



### **July 6th, 2013 – Huye District, Rwanda**

We traveled to the Huye District to the Institute of National Museums of Rwanda to meet with the Director General, Mr. Alphonse Umuliisa, to discuss future collaborations for the opening of the genocide museum in April 2014 commemorating the 20 year anniversary. The group discussed possible healing projects for patrons to utilize at the exit of the museum to promote expression and release of their feelings experienced.

Next, the group traveled to the National University of Rwanda to meet with 25 students who were members of the Association des Eleves Rescape du Genocide (AERG) which unites 43,000 Rwandans around the country as survivors of the 1994 genocide. Many expressed feelings of anger, disappointment, fear, sadness and shame. Though at first the students were very quiet, with blunted affect, they soon began releasing during the chakra activating physical exercises. Afterwards, many shared ways in which they would diffuse their anger by listening to music, talking to friends, sharing their experiences, developing group circles, playing sports, watching TV, watching movies and praying.

Once the students completed the training, the team joined for a collective lunch at a local restaurant where there were discussions of future partnership between the students, AERG and Meaningfulworld. The students expressed their desire for additional trainings in the following year, potentially an extensive 4-5 days. In summary, Dr. Ani made recommendations for regular correspondence via Skype, and committed to monthly meetings. She also recommended that before focusing on outside partnerships, AERG could benefit by partnering with local university groups such as the Genocide Studies and the Peace and Conflict Resolution programs. Dr. Kalayjian donated to their library a set of books on Mass Trauma and Emotional Healing around the World, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, as well as Bach Rescue Remedies, and other gifts for hygiene.

### **July 7th, 2013 – Rotsiru District, Rwanda**

#### **(Photo) Widows of Genocide learning self-healing**



We traveled for over 5 hours through the mountains of Rwanda, through unpaved and windy roads revealing the beauty of the country side and the warmth of those living in small villages along the way. We met with 32 widow survivors of the Genocide, a nationwide survivors' group. This group provides business opportunities, social support, and much needed other financial assistance. Some of their projects include growing pineapple and coffee and exporting it.

When asked what helped them cope and endure impact of the genocide, they shared the following: Their faith in God, their connection to the group support, and satisfaction in their work. The group was so moved with our compassion and interest that they donated us two handmade traditional baskets filled with their crop of pineapple and honey.

A recent report noted that the GDP in Rwanda grew by 7.7% last year and over one million people have been lifted out of poverty in five years. Particular progress has been made towards gender equality where women are represented in cabinet and they make up more than half of Members of Parliament (Rwandan Air News, June-August Edition, 2013).

**(Photo below) Team with collaborators by Lake Tanganyika, Bujumbura, Burundi**



### **Burundi**

July 8th we travelled to Burundi to embark on the next chapter of our journey. Arriving in Burundi, we were overwhelmed by the warmth and beauty of the climate and the country, especially the warmth, hospitality, and the smiles of the people. After meeting with the officials and our collaborators, Father Germain and Professor Manasse we began to finalize our all day workshop for the next day. Although we were expecting 50 people, we were pleasantly surprised to have over 127 students, faculty and visitors participate

in our program on engendering peace within and around through mind-body-eco-spirit health, forgiveness, EQ, and other integrative healing approaches. Some of the traumas shared were: living on their own, becoming independent, illness in the family, family disagreements, and ending relationships. Many of integrative tools were shared with great success. They specially appreciated our integrative approach, managing anger techniques, emotional intelligence, managing one's emotions especially in a counseling session, and self-care. We completed our program with a chakra balancing exercise with affirmations, which was extremely well received.

Follow up collaborations included: Collaborative research on PTSD, forgiveness, and meaning –making, generational transmission research, establishment of Ecological Club, including assigning co-chairs and executive committee and members, and identifying the following projects: Beautification of the entrance of the University, raising consciousness regarding keeping the campus clean, developing a peace and forgiveness garden, and a larger campaign for mindfulness with respect to loving and taking care of mother earth.



**(photo) Meaningfulworld Ecology Club developing peace & forgiveness garden at Bujumbura University**



### **Bujumbura University students and faculty waving their Meaningfulworld Certificates**

#### **In conclusion:**

During our Humanitarian Engendering Peace, Healing, and Transformation Mission in Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi we conducted over 15 workshops, training programs, lectures, and presentations, working directly with close to a thousand students, counselors, youth, women, men, older adults, and children. Indirectly we worked with over 3000 people of all ages. We had a very successful, insightful, and transformative mission. We nurtured our collaborating agencies, universities, civil society, orphanages, and hospitals. We have forged new collaborative research projects, developed many forgiveness and peace gardens around the 3 countries, introduced neighborhood association ideas, developed Meaningfulworld Ecological Clubs, survivor healing groups, post Genocide healing groups, building capacity for local civic engagement networks, connecting students, universities, volunteers, slums, NGO's, state, hospitals, the media, and much more...

Our team worked cohesively and practiced mindfulness to prevent vicarious trauma through: daily practice of yoga, meditation, goal setting, dream analysis, processing, journaling, flower essences, and social support.

Along with our new and ongoing partners throughout East Africa, we are grateful for the many opportunities to continue working together to heal individuals, families, and communities in this region, to conduct collaborative research, develop sustainable projects, and to develop peace and forgiveness gardens.

Founded in 1990, the Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP) Meaningfulworld, charitable organization affiliated with the United Nations Dept of Public Information, has achieved international recognition as a leader in training humanitarian outreach professionals as well as responding to two decades of global and local disasters. ATOP is committed to health and global education promoting state-of-the-art scientific theory, peace, forgiveness, consciousness research, internship, and the development of technical skills to train mental health professionals, teachers, psychologists, art therapists, nutritionists, alternative medicine practitioners, clergy, nurses, mediators, interfaith ministers, and lay persons committed to service the self and humanity. Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Outreach teams have helped rehabilitate survivors from over 45 calamities, making a daily difference in people's lives helping to transform tragedy and trauma into healing and meaning-making through post trauma growth, resilience, emotional intelligence, mind-body-eco-spirit health, visionary leadership, empowerment and artful collaboration through a new world view.

**Our Motto: When one helps another BOTH become stronger**

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