


# Rwanda Genocide Survivors Teach Life Lessons

 [independent.com/news/2009/oct/15/rwanda-genocide-survivors-teach-life-lessons/](http://independent.com/news/2009/oct/15/rwanda-genocide-survivors-teach-life-lessons/)

By Joshua Brayer

Like many Santa Barbarans, the challenges in my life are minimal, but I struggle sometimes to keep things in perspective. The worries in my life are far from life-threatening: I lament the state of the U.S. economy, I dread doing my taxes, and I get a little bit upset when my favorite sports teams lose.

My son's not so different. Like most middle school-aged kids, he despises eating his vegetables and going to bed early, and is primarily concerned with maximizing his allowance and his video game-playing time and minimizing his housework chores. So we both got a wake-up call last week when two young men from Africa - men who have faced greater challenges than we probably ever will - visited Santa Barbara and shared their story.



Courtesy Photo

All smiles on the boat.

Frederick Ndabaramiye and his friend Zachary Dusingizimana are both survivors of the [genocide in Rwanda](#) during which an estimated 800,000 people were killed in the space of 100 days.

Frederick was 15 years old in 1998 when a group of rebels attacked his village, killing his neighbors and relatives and leaving him maimed for life. Nearly ten years after the atrocities, Frederick met a group of Californian teenagers who were riding their bicycles across Rwanda with their teacher, John Seigel-Boettner. They were students from [Santa Barbara Middle School](#) (SBMS), a private school that believes in giving its students greater perspective through global education. SBMS kids take mandatory bicycle trips throughout the year that force them to unplug from society and realize that life is not all about text messaging and surfing the Internet. The school slows everything down for them and allows them to do some soul searching.



Courtesy Photo

Frederick Ndabaramiye

Each summer, social studies teacher and longtime bike tour leader Seigel-Boettner takes a select group of kids on a special ride. It was the summer of 2008 when they met and befriended Frederick in Rwanda, and heard his story. Before they parted, Frederick said that he would visit them one day. The Santa Barbara crew never expected that Frederick would follow through, because most people probably wouldn't.



Courtesy Photo

Frederick mountain biking at the Douglas Family Preserve.

But Frederick defied expectations, visiting SBMS for the first time last year, and returning this time with Zachary, who had never before visited the United States. The two spent a few days with

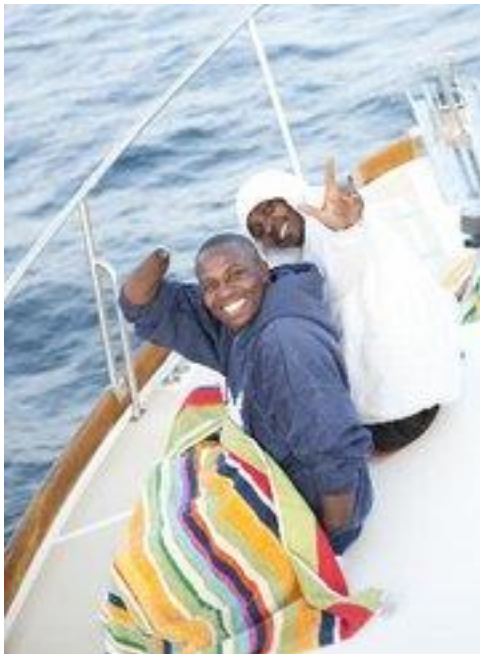
SBMS students, teachers, and parents last week, joining us for an early morning beach swim (Zachary's first time in the ocean), an afternoon mountain bike ride, and an evening sailing trip, and visiting SBMS classes to share the lessons of their experiences in Rwanda.



Courtesy Photo

Frederick joined SBMS students and teachers for an early morning ocean swim.

Simply to look at Frederick, who is missing both of his hands, is to know something of his story, but what defines him is the way he has been able to turn his experience of torture into a message of peace, love, and forgiveness. Speaking to SBMS students, he explained that he was not much older than them when a group of men rounded him up along with his villagers and handed Frederick a machete. "Kill them all," they instructed him. Frightened, he refused. So the men did it themselves, bludgeoning and slaughtering his friends and family. Then they dealt with Frederick. They cut off his hands and part of his forearms with a machete and left him to die.



Courtesy Photo

Frederick and Zachary sailing on the Pacific.

With SBMS students hanging on every word, Frederick explained that he had been one of the lucky ones. A couple of girls who had survived by hiding during the attack eventually found him and got him help. After a brutal year of rehabilitation in a refugee hospital, Frederick was healthy enough to survive. But what does a young boy with no hands do in Rwanda?

The time he spent recovering from the mutilation was a significant turning point in his life, Frederick told his listeners. During that time he met Zachary, another survivor. Together, they went through the feeling of wanting revenge. “I wanted to get a gun and shoot them all for what they did to our country,” Zachary said, but that didn’t happen.



Courtesy Photo

Zachary Dusingizimana

What did happen was something cathartic, and it was the foundation of their message to the students at SBMS: to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness. Frederick and Zachary realized that they were being consumed by their hate and desire for revenge, and that, in order to move on with their lives, they had to forgive their transgressors. “When you don’t forgive, it’s like you are in jail and you are surrounded by walls and you can’t get out,” said Zachary. “But forgiveness is not just words,” he added, “it’s action.”



Courtesy Photo

Frederick checking out a colony of harbor seals.

So Frederick and Zachary decided to set up a sort of orphanage for people who had permanent wounds from the genocide, whether they were missing arms or legs, or had been shot or otherwise wounded physically or mentally. They started small, as they had no funding. But in the last year they have received significant funding from a woman who has her own orphanage in Venice, California, and they have been able to build their own center: the [Ubumwe Community Center](#) in Gisenyi, Rwanda.



Courtesy Photo

Frederick signing autographs for the kids.

At the center, Frederick and Zachary teach survivors an array of crafts and skills, including weaving, sewing, drawing, and painting. Even with my own two perfectly functioning hands, I couldn't even come close to replicating the artwork that these people make despite missing limbs. What they are creating, and what Frederick and Zachary are creating out of the losses they have experienced, is nothing short of miraculous. Frederick and Zachary brought to Santa Barbara artwork and stories, the warmth of their friendship and the inspiration of their message. They left us with a dose of humility none of us will soon forget.