

The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford

Transcript by Sue Hammond (Higgins Volunteer)

RW17_2

Name: Chantal

Gender: Female

Date of Birth: N/A

Place of Birth: Rwanda

Occupation:

Date of Interview: 22nd March 2017

Interviewed by: Rosie Newbigging

Length of interview: 32 mins

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Hello Chantal. Thank you for agreeing to help us with this important project.
You're welcome.

So Chantal, tell me about your feelings towards living in Bedford.

I've been here for quite a long time. I moved to Bedford in 2001 and I find Bedford as one of my home now - quite settled and happy to live in Bedford

How do you feel you were received when you first came to Bedford? Do you feel you were made to feel welcome?

I was welcomed when I moved to Bedford; I was originally living in London, and before moving here I was used to the British culture and British system. When I moved to Bedford, I didn't know many people but it was quite easy to integrate because I already knew the way of living in the UK.

What are your hopes for the future?

My hopes for the future, as I said I'm settled here I'm looking for a bright future, I'm studying social work at the moment and I am hoping for a good future with a steady job so I can give something back to the society and live a happy life with my family. Those are my hopes for the future.

You have three children?

The first one is 18, the other one is 17 and 7 years old.

What are your hopes for your children's future?

My hopes for my children are to see them happy. We've built a life here and this is their home and they belong here I would say. I wish to see them happy and to see them achieving what they want to do in their life, settle down and have a good future.

Can you tell me where you are from originally?

Originally, I am from Rwanda which is in East Africa.

Why did you leave Rwanda?

I left Rwanda in 1994 after the genocide against the Tutsi. During the month of April to July a number of people were brutally killed and I managed to survive but I lost almost my entire family so I had no-one there by then who had survived the genocide. That is the reason that I decided to leave the country and look for a new life somewhere different away from the horrible memories

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Do you want to say a little bit more about that?

Well the genocide happened in April 1994 until July 1994 and it took one hundred days. It was the extremists Hutus who were murdering the Tutsis because of the ethnicity issues. It goes way back to 1957 when the Hutus did not want the Tutsis and create a level of discrimination, hate, denial of education, the reasoning behind it was too political really the government which was on power for many years were the majority and the Hutu population living in Rwanda were 80% they never liked Tutsis really. So this ideology of hating Tutsis went on for many years and we end up having genocide.

05 mins

I'm not too sure whether I could go into more details with what happened before. Due to the short time we have. I've seen quite a lot as I was growing up anyway the Tutsis were called names such as snakes, cockroaches at very young age, going to school and mixing with other children was very hard anyway, our parents were discriminated, we were not allowed to play with other children. So all of these were build-up from the extremists Hutus hating the Tutsis and created the killing. And then of course because of what happened in 1957, they killed quite a number of Tutsis, and again in 1962, 1973 and so on, and some Tutsi managed to flee the country. They went to live in the neighbouring countries Congo, Uganda, Tanzania as refugee's. And they had always wanted to come back to Rwanda for many years but the Hutu government would not allow them to come back. They wanted to come back since 1970s but that has not happened and then they formed a military called RPF (Rwanda Patriotic Front) from abroad in neighbouring countries. So they forced in to come back in 1989

I don't think I would go much into detail of all of that but when the genocide happened in 1994 the Tutsis who stayed in Rwanda were killed and over one million innocent Tutsis were brutally killed including my family - four brothers, two sisters, some uncles, my aunties as the result of the genocide against the Tutsi. So we'd been hiding for 100 days but my family, my brothers and sisters, they died between April and May so I took my own way, and my mother took her own way, to find a hiding place and I was going everywhere to find a place to hide. At one point, I thought my mother was dead but luckily I managed to survive genocide which was a very long journey and I found out that my mother was alive after few months after the genocide ended. I don't think I can comment about the details of that journey at the moment as I sometimes find it very distressing.

When genocide ended in July I spent my time searching the whole country to see if any member of my family had survived, because we were not living in the same area but none of them had survived. And my mother whom I did not know that she

survived, I found out that she had made her own way to Uganda, as soon as she realised that none of her children survived, and she decided to go to a friend in Uganda. As soon as I found out about her being alive I left my home in Rwanda and went to find her in Uganda and stayed with her till February 1995. But luckily I had one sister who was living in London since 1992 with her and in February 1995, she invited me to come to London and stay with her because life was not that easy, I was stressed and depressed with everything we'd seen and faced and witnessed during genocide such as torturing and watching people them massacred, killing with machetes and everything. So I wasn't myself by then, there was no life and they was nothing to look back to with what happened to the family we'd lost so I came to Britain to see my sister and stayed with her a bit .

10 mins

She left me in London and she went back to Uganda because that's where her husband comes from and I stayed with good friends of my sister and that's how I started my life in Britain and claimed my asylum as I had nowhere to go back to

Thank you for sharing that. It must have been difficult.

It not been easy journey and it was very hard life with everything happened. I would it was not easy life, I would say since as young as 5 years old. But June 1994, it was a very hard life, when I came to Britain things changed in a way. I was away from home being closer to Rwanda had so much memories and never wanted to go to Rwanda even when I was in Uganda. I would think of going back home the next thing I would ask to myself where am I going? Everything was destroyed, we had no house, everything was burned down, had no family there. Nothing to look forward to going back to Rwanda, somewhere I use to call my home, but coming to London it did help me a little bit to come back as a normal person; all helped me to reduce the level of my stress and the trauma I had faced and everything else.

Can I ask you a little bit more about your journey? You know if you don't want to answer the questions don't feel you have to. So when you went from Rwanda to Uganda really how did you get there?

My journey from Rwanda to Uganda it was not easy journey anyway, I had no money. So I relied on people whom I didn't even know, there was a family who was staying near where I was staying in Rwanda and they could see that I was searching for my family and they found out that my mother is in Uganda safe and alive. They offered to give me a lift to Uganda which is a 7 hours journey by car so I was really lucky. It was first time I went to Uganda, didn't know where I was going to find my mother, even though communications was not that simple, we never had phones, the only thing I knew where I would find my mother I was told hat she was not far from Makerere university in Uganda. So this friend and neighbour drove me there it took us 7 hours overnight we had to stop over and we stayed in bed and breakfast because it was a long journey. They paid for the hotel and then the next morning we continued by car and we managed to get to the university and one of the lady who worked at the university we went asking for her name I never met her but we managed to find her. As soon as we found her, she couldn't take me straight to my mother and it was quite sad I was looking forward to seeing her the same day. So, she took me to her own house and told me that my mother had moved to another area which was far from Kampara and she was very busy on that day and I had to wait for two days so she can come with me and take me where my mother was.

15 mins

So I stayed with this lady she was a nice lady, but a stranger, but during those days with everything I had seen, I was not scared of what could happen to me. So, my journey was by car to Uganda, but from Uganda to the UK obviously I came by plane.

Can I ask you what it was like when you met up with your mother again?

Oh God, I cried. When my mother saw me and because she didn't know that I was alive and she knew none of her children survived genocide, except the one who was in London. She saw somebody coming towards her and it was me, it was like seeing a ghost as she said afterwards. I remember when I got there, there was an open gate she was sitting outside with other people and I was with people approaching towards where they were sitting. We talked about it after, she said that whether she was dreaming she couldn't believe what she saw until I got so close and I said "Mom." We were both in tears we both didn't know what to do, hugged each other she was happy to see me, I was happy to see her and the last time I saw her was around April the 15. I think it was September so all this time not knowing that her daughter is alive so it was an amazing moment. I am sure people who watched us can say more. One of the happiest moments knowing that my mother was alive, and seeing her after over five months.

Can I ask you how you felt as you were leaving Rwanda? What emotions do you remember?

To be honest with you by then I would say all I wanted was to get away from Rwanda. I had nothing there. I had nobody, no mother, no father, no brother, no sister, no aunt; no cousins so, there was nothing left everything I had had been taken away during genocide. So for me to be there, if I had stayed there by then I would have killed myself or do something bad there was nothing to look forward. I could see I had no future I had nothing to leave Rwanda by then it was the best thing to do, if I stayed there I don't know what could have happened. When I went to Uganda and saw my mother that was a different story but still I was happy to be away from Rwanda at that time.

Can I ask you whether when you decided to go, can you remember your last day in Rwanda?

20 mins

My last day in Rwanda it was in January 1995 I had to go and get a passport in Rwanda it was just a way of going there and actual applied for it and then it was sent back to me in Uganda. It was a place that I hated and I didn't want to go but I had no other option I went to get what I wanted and then stayed there for two nights and back to Uganda

So when you travelled to the UK did you leave from Rwanda or Uganda?

No, I left from Uganda, but the sad thing when we were applying for a visa we didn't want to tell my mum because we thought telling her that I am going, she would probably stop me, not only stop me but knowing that the only child she had near-by is leaving her again. So we didn't tell her not until it was few days when I got the visa and we told her that I was going to visit my sister in London.

You flew? Did you fly from Uganda?

Yes I came by plane; I think it was British Airways by then. So it was direct flight if I remember well I took 6 or 7 hours. It was the first time I flew which was a bit strange I think. It was a new thing to me by then as we never travelled by plane.

How old were you?

I was only 17.

And you were all on your own?

I was on my own, yes, didn't speak much of English or anything but I was put in a plane. The family where my mother was staying, they managed to assist me to the plane, and then I came to straight to London it was a direct flight. My sister was waiting for me at Heathrow airport.

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So is there anything else you want to say in terms of when you arrived what your experience was? How did you feel? You were in London.

Wow. I arrived on 12 February 1995. It was winter-time. Of course I didn't know anything about winter so I was in my summer clothes, I think I was wearing a trouser and a T shirt so getting to the airport, as soon as I opened the door I could feel wind and freezing cold it was something new for me. So, the time it took to go through the immigration check and all of that, I was feeling very cold. As soon as I came out my sister had a coat waiting, and scarf, and gloves and everything. So it was a very strange experience, something I used to hear about that Europe and America's are cold places they've got winter... of course we don't have winter where I come from. It was a new experience.

25 mins

As soon as I reached there, I thought how I am going to stay in this country – it was cold. I was questioning how do people survive in this weather, how do people live? So it was a strange experience I was well covered with the jacket my sister gave me and then from there we took underground. Everything was all new to me really - never heard of underground in my life. I just went into the underground and see the stairs going up and down was a nice experience something new but then again scary. You just go in and up the stairs and underneath again, I was looking forward to see more later on.

How did you feel when you saw your sister again?

I was happy to see her, she probably was happy than I was, we were both happy but I think for her knowing that everybody brothers and sisters are all gone, and then there was one coming who survived genocide. For me really it was a relief to see that I still have a sister, she was far away, didn't know how we were going to reach one another

one but not something I had imagining that I would be able to see her soon. So I was very happy.

And do you want to say a little bit about the organisation you are involved in now?

At the moment I am involved with *Rwandan Survivors of 1994 against the Tutsi*. The reason I got involved in this is because I am a genocide survivor living in UK, and then of course, there are not many people who survived the genocide living in Britain. As I say they had a high number of Tutsis that were killed. Being in Britain as a survivor we thought it would be nice for other survivors to get together -, when I came to Britain - it was a different environment away from the bad memories, but then again the memory was still there, the memories of what happened, and the best way was to get together with other people who went through the same thing as I did we needed someone whom we can share our memories with. We started it as a way of getting together and remember our loved ones and be able to communicate among ourselves and be able to identify who we are. Because all the time I was in Britain I was finding it very hard to express my journey during the 100 days of surviving, and the only people I could relate to were the survivors. I couldn't relate in terms of talking about it - what we went through - I could not relate myself to anybody, even to those who are from Rwanda and weren't there during genocide. Not only that, I was even finding it very harder to talk to my sister about the journey. However when meeting somebody who would tell you that she survived genocide - we could see that we were connected and we started opening up to each other about how we were hiding, what we have faced what we have seen, and then we thought about having an organisation where we can start searching and reach out other survivors who were in Britain an find a way of helping one another.

30 mins

And then of course we knew being a survivor of genocide we were kind of lonely a- I would say every survivor was hiding in their own corner and we were not very open to other Rwandan community. We preferred to be on our own; we preferred not to talk about genocide. But as soon as we started to get together, as you can see we meet up and we open up. So we decided to have the organisation where every survivor empower one another, everyone was isolated, so we took it as a social gathering to begin with and we started visiting one another, going different places everywhere you would hear there is a survivor - somebody had a child who is a survivor - a few, five, six people whoever was available as a genocide survivor then we would go and visit one another that is how we started this organisation. It's called Urumuri¹ and rumuri is the meaning of light. And now we educate about the genocide and organise the commemoration every year as well as raising awareness of genocide in general

OK. Thank you very much, Chantal. Is there anything else you want to share?

I would say thank you to you for getting me involved, and to be able to share this with you, and participating in my local community. So thank you.

Well, thank you

¹ This is my best guess at spelling.

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