

{ “I believe that our lives do not belong to us alone,
but also to those who desperately need us.” }

– Felix Hagenimana, '18

Dreaming of helping the vulnerable

By Felix Hagenimana
Class of '18

I was born in Rwanda, Africa, in December 1981. Historically, Rwanda had three ethnic groups: Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. Throughout the nation's history there has been conflict between these ethnic groups. On the morning of April 7, 1994, I became a witness, and survivor, of one of the most horrific genocides the world has ever seen.

That morning, my uncle told me the Rwandan president's plane had been shot down and that Hutus were going to kill us. Being a naïve, optimistic 12-year-old boy, I said it was not possible for them to do that. But that very day, a crowd of people came to our house in Kigali. My uncle and I tried to escape and they chased us. My uncle surrendered to them. After watching my uncle being murdered, I ran to save my life.

I joined a big group of people fleeing and we gathered at a nearby church. The church usually accommodated 300 people, but this day saw over 4,000 people pressed inside its walls, seeking safety and refuge. Lying down was not possible, nor could all of us sit. We agreed to take turns sitting down. Thirst became intolerable, as did the heat.

On the third day, the murderers who had surrounded the church with all kinds of weaponry began to do their job. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had left us. We surrendered to our tormentors. In the midst of the killings, by some strange reflex, I fell on the ground and they thought me for dead. Late that stormy night, as I was stuck in a pile of dead people, I heard a person moving. Not sure if he was surrendering his last breath, I grabbed his pants. He helped me out of that pile. As I was too weak to walk, he carried me on his shoulders.

We walked for an hour and arrived in



the big swamp after midnight. For the next three months we survived on sugar cane and dirty water. After those three months, my friend's feet began to swell from the cold. He could not stand, and he told me he was too tired of trying to save his miserable life. He wished me good luck and told me he was going to find someone to kill

him. Being sure that I could not survive on my own in that swamp, I decided to follow him out. Fortunately for us, the slaughters had ended.

The Rwandan genocide lasted three months and close to one million people were killed. I later learned that of the 4,000 of us that sought refuge at the church, only

About the McKusick Diversity Fellowships

Felix Hagenimana is a McKusick Diversity Fellow at the University of Maine School of Law. The Fellowship provides tuition and other support to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with a goal of increasing the diversity of the student body at Maine Law and among Maine's bench and bar.

The Fellowship honors the late Vincent L. McKusick (1921-2014), former Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. The lead gifts for the McKusick Diversity Fellowship Fund came from the law firm of Pierce Atwood LLP and Dr. Victor McKusick, the Chief's twin brother. Numerous colleagues and admirers helped to build this endowment.

McKusick Fellows receive an honors scholarship for all three years at Maine Law, have an opportunity for a paid internship at Pierce Atwood, and join a stellar community of

current and past McKusick Fellows.

During his storied career, Vincent McKusick was recognized for the emphasis he put on the role of public service in the legal profession, including his active role on the Maine Law Board of Visitors. After participating in the Manhattan Project in World War II, McKusick graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and in 1950 from Harvard Law School, *magna cum laude*.

McKusick clerked for Chief Judge Learned Hand of the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. He then went to Hutchinson, Pierce, Atwood & Scribner (now Pierce Atwood) in Portland. In 1977, he was appointed Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. He retired and rejoined Pierce Atwood in 1992, and he remained active with the firm until his passing in 2014.

a handful of us survived.

As I got older and began to make sense of all this, I was in search of purpose in my life. I had turned 30 years old, was living in California and was not sure if my life would be worth living if I stayed on my career path as a linguist. I had just had my linguistics work published into a book. Nonetheless, I felt I was not being helpful to the people around the world who suffer from injustice. In this process of reflection, a friend told me, "Life is like a game of poker, and you play the hand you're dealt. But a strategic player can play a weak hand and win the game."

I began to think about it. What is the hand you're dealt? Well, it's the things you do not have control over. I did not choose to be born in Rwanda, or to witness such tragedies at an age when one's knowledge of death is limited to what you see on television. But I also realized that I could still play my weak hand and have a positive outcome.

Because I speak four languages, and because of my desire to help others, I had been volunteering as a translator for refugees seeking asylum in San Francisco. I learned a great deal about immigration law, and I concluded that I wanted to be a lawyer so I could someday help others who face similar barriers to my own. That's how I embarked on the journey to seek a legal education. I applied to about 30 law schools, and got accepted into nearly all of them.

I chose to attend Maine Law for many



Felix Hagenimana and Registrar Brenda Berry at a Portland Sea Dogs Game.

reasons. It's a small school where you have access to all the resources you need. I visited friends in Portland for a few months in 2012 and liked the city. There are a great deal of exotic food small businesses, and I can find almost anything that I'd buy in stores in Rwanda. I'm interested in some sort of international law, and there is a growing international community here in Portland. My classmates have such incredible diverse backgrounds and experiences that you would not expect in Maine, which enriches the classroom discussions.

My dream job is to work for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, or do advocacy work on behalf of immigrants, refugees, or other vulnerable peo-

ple. I believe that our lives do not belong to us alone, but also to those who desperately need us.

I mentioned earlier that when I was a child in Rwanda, I was a naïve optimist. While I no longer consider myself naïve, I am, and always will be, an optimist. With the great education that I'm receiving at Maine Law, I am now in a position in which I can begin to forge my own future, wherever it may lead. **ML**

Watch Felix's story "Remembering Rwanda 1994" on Maine Law's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/UMaineLawSchool