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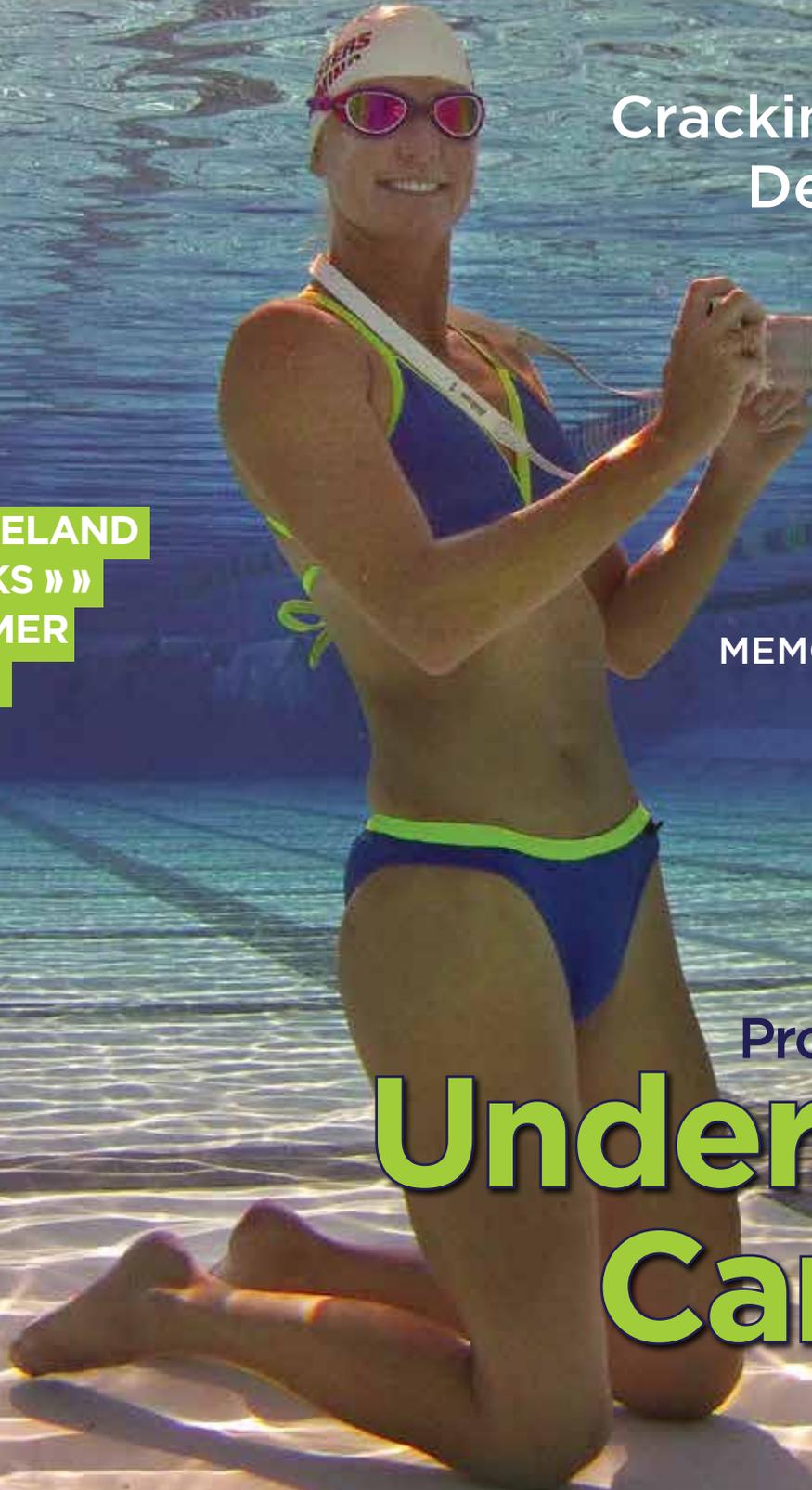
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Taylor Krauss founded Voices of Rwanda to capture the stories of Tutsi survivors of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.

Alexander Gibbons

Bearing Witness

Taylor Krauss illuminates
tales of darkness from
the heart of Africa

BY ELAINE K. HOWLEY

It's well past 11 p.m. where Taylor Krauss sits in a friend's house in Kigali, Rwanda, as he maneuvers his laptop to maintain Skype's line of sight. With one arm he arranges a mosquito net around him, and in his decidedly cheerful demeanor—disarming in its open honesty and ability to connect with others—explains with a chuckle:

"I had malaria last year, and that was not fun."

Now settled under the gauzy protection, Krauss gets back to telling his story. The 35-year-old swimmer, ultrarunner, and filmmaker has dedicated the past decade of his life to collecting and preserving the painful memories of people who survived one of the worst human rights atrocities in recent history: the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.



Taylor Krauss has made a career of filming difficult stories in central Africa. Jonx Pillemer

Landlocked Rwanda sits in eastern Central Africa, alongside Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and the Central African Republic of Congo. Roughly the size of Maryland, Rwanda lies just a few degrees south of the equator in the African Great Lakes Region. Its tropical climate is tempered by its elevation, and Lake Kivu forms part of its border with Congo. Massive Lake Victoria lies about 200 miles east of the capital city, Kigali. "It's one of the most gorgeous countries," says Krauss. "It's like the Switzerland of Africa with rolling, green hills."

The lush, mountainous countryside is not, however, what Rwanda is best known for on the international stage. Rather, when one hears the name "Rwanda," nearly always the first thought is of its horrific 1994 genocide, which began on April 7 when tensions between the country's two largest ethnic groups—the Hutus and the Tutsis—erupted after president Major General Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot down. According to the United Human Rights Council, in 1994, the Rwandan population of 7 million was 85 percent Hutu, 14 percent Tutsi, and 1 percent Twa.

Though ethnic conflicts had been ongoing for generations, with previous iterations of genocide being perpetrated by each side, this time it was the Hutus pursuing the Tutsis. The extreme violence lasted until July 15, by which time more than 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus opposed to the killing campaign had been murdered and an estimated 2 million people had fled the country. By

some estimates, 70 to 75 percent of all Tutsis in the country were killed. Combined with the people who fled, Rwanda's population declined by more than 20 percent in just a few months.

"This was a long planned genocide," Krauss says, "and it wasn't the first one. It wasn't just erupting into random violence," he explains about the swiftness with which the killing began and the methodical manner in which it was conducted. "It was highly organized with youth militias and radio stations broadcasting lists of people to be killed."

In short, the genocide was devastating in every possible sense. But it was a world away to Krauss, who was a 14-year-old swimmer in Phoenix, Ariz., at the time.

ORIGINS

Growing up, Krauss trained at the Phoenix Swim Club with Dave Berkoff (of "Berkoff Blast-off" fame) and several other swimming greats. Though he insists he "wasn't a contender," he held his own. At Yale University, he opted to play water polo instead of swim, and graduated in 2002 with a degree in film studies.

Krauss first became acquainted with Rwanda in 2004 while working on a short film about the genocide. "I went home and I realized that I couldn't share that film with the world. I was a very young filmmaker, and I didn't know whether it was true, so I shelved it and realized that I needed to return [to Rwanda] because of what I experienced."

Inspired by Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archives that

document the stories of Holocaust survivors, Krauss returned to Rwanda and founded Voices of Rwanda, a nongovernment organization that records the testimonies of Tutsi survivors of the genocide to preserve their experiences for posterity.

Krauss had no funding when he launched the organization, just a camera, a couple of friends willing to help, and a deep sense of obligation to just listen. "We've struggled for many years to build it, and we're still struggling because people would much rather send money for certain kinds of aid like roads or medicines than the intangible recording of history," he says. But the work is vital to moving forward. "Listening to people is a piece of justice. True justice can't be served without it."

Though Voices of Rwanda is a viable nonprofit, Krauss doesn't earn a living for his efforts there. Rather, he supports himself as a freelance journalist and filmmaker and frequently

works in Rwanda's neighboring countries. In 2009 he won the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for best international reporting on television for his work on Worldfocus's "Crisis in the Congo: The Story of Pascal and Vestine," which documents the use of rape as a weapon of war in Congo.

In 2013, he was arrested and held for four days in Uganda while working on a story about an opposition leader in that troubled country. He says that experience showed him just how quickly one can begin to feel dehumanized when freedom and the power to control one's own actions are removed.

MEMORY AND TESTIMONY

The five excerpts of testimonies posted on the VOR website hint at the deep rivers of anguish that still run through Rwanda and the survivors 21 years later. Krauss prefers to call these people *rescapés*, a word that means "one who escapes"

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in French, one of the country's three official languages.

This point is eloquently and heartbreakingly driven home by an older man named Carole in his testimony: "I lost my family and am living a miserable life. So can I say that I survived? I am just breathing. This is the grace of God. But how can you say that I survived? If my children would have survived, I could say that I survived. But all of them are gone." He pauses for a long, thoughtful moment then continues, "[Can I say that] I have something left to sustain me?" The question hangs unanswered.

It's these sort of raw, honest moments that make the work Krauss is doing so terribly important, if wrenching. The VOR approach is to let the flood of memories surge forth unbroken by asking *rescapés* to recount everything from their family history right on up to the modern day. This painstaking process usually takes 4 to 12 hours of filming, and some testimonies

require several days to complete. This intense immersion in another person's history, Krauss says, is "incredibly intimate. You feel connected with someone when they share, and that's the most profound kind of filmmaking I've ever experienced. We have a real human bond because of that."

He's also found that maintaining a relationship with those who've testified has become a critical part of the organization's work and offers some of the most rewarding moments for him personally. "I'm realizing how lucky I am. I've met the most incredible people in the world, and I get to spend time with them." Although he's an outsider, Krauss says that's helped him gain trust and let each *rescapé* know that the rest of the world is finally listening. "They've embraced me. It's led to ... incredible relationships."

But listening for hours on end, day after day, to the harrowing tales of innocent people who were systematically targeted is spiritually taxing.

Krauss uses swimming and ultrarunning to help him process the emotions that might otherwise threaten his ability to continue doing this work. "Swimming and running are my therapy. Being able to release through physical activity is the way I can completely unwind. It restores me. I've been indelibly changed by these experiences and by what I witness here—I don't mean just witnessing poverty or inequity or injustice—but secondarily witnessing the past. That tends to make somebody sad and cynical and angry. But when I swim, I feel more myself. Distance running and swimming really are what I need to be healthy and happy."

SWIMMING TO RWANDA

Though swimming helps

Krauss keep his spirit bright, for others, it can be a painful reminder of what's happened. Take 27-year-old Claudine, for example. She begins her testimony by recalling happy memories of skipping school to go for a swim

in the lake with her friends, but before long, "her childhood idyll memory gets totally polluted by what she witnessed during the genocide, of Hutu militias telling people to walk into the water as far as they could go. She couldn't retrieve just the beautiful memory because the other memories were so present. The water became a powerful metaphor to share some of that," Krauss says.

Channeling Claudine's experience, literally and figuratively, Krauss was moved to swim the Strait of Gibraltar in 2013 as a fundraiser for VOR. "After starting the organization in 2006, for many years I was totally intertwined and caught up in the history. I didn't know how to sort through it all." Not just a coping strategy, swimming became a metaphor for how the work has changed him. "It manifested what I was feeling internally, of finding myself in the middle of this ocean, drowning in African issues."

Krauss got tough conditions on the day he swam from Europe to

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Taylor Krauss shoots aerial footage of Lake Kivu and surrounding towns.
Taylor Krauss

Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar, but he persevered, and despite being very cold and unsure whether he would ever make it, he managed to finish. It was a special victory. “The tide was pulling me out and I was losing the window of opportunity. I could see the sun flickering and shimmering on the water as it set over Morocco, and the pilot said, ‘You have to sprint.’ And then, when you have success in that close proximity to failure, that makes the success even sweeter. If it’s not hard, it’s probably not worth doing. It was a huge lesson to me that I apply to

my work.” The lessons of maintaining concentration, stamina, and patience are important for keeping the dream of his organization alive, Krauss says.

THE FUTURE OF PRESERVING THE PAST

And the future of Voices of Rwanda is not certain. Krauss is currently searching for private donors to fund the organization’s efforts. He’s also looking for an endowment at an American university to create an archive for the 1,000-plus testimonies they’ve recorded over the years. “I’d like for it to live at

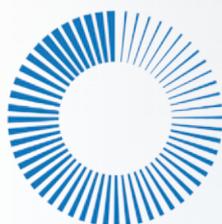
an American institution and be there in perpetuity, and I’d like to build an archive in Rwanda. It’s a work in progress to figure it out,” he says.

The organization is currently based in Kigali, and Krauss hopes to open additional offices in other regions throughout Rwanda. “If you’re an aging widow in the countryside, you’re not going to get in a car for 6 hours [to come to Kigali]. There are stories and people we can’t serve because of proximity.” Within Kigali, word of mouth has spread. To keep up with demand, VOR has several staffers who’ve been trained in everything from basic typing skills for transcribing interviews to how to make *rescapés* feel comfortable enough to share their stories.

When freelancing for the Associated Press and the various other news organizations he works with, Krauss travels extensively in Europe, Africa, and the United States. When he’s in the United States, he’s

based in Philadelphia and swims with the Fins Aquatics Club. He also spends time in New York, where he visits Coney Island for open water training. In Rwanda, he swims at a few different hotel pools dotted around the country and Lake Kivu when he has the opportunity to travel a bit farther afield.

Lake Kivu sits on a fault line at the base of a volcano and many of the locals don’t trust it; they worry that one day the lake will belch a massive bubble of methane gas that will suffocate them all. Despite this possibility, Krauss says Lake Kivu is “about my favorite spot to swim. It’s the picture of beauty and peace in one of the harshest and most violent corners of the world.” He’s planning a 55-mile solo crossing in 2019 on the 25th anniversary of the genocide—a fitting tribute to so many souls lost to the water and the many more still wading through their worst memories. **S**



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