



Joshua Miller

## Professor Joshua Miller and the Professional Fellows Program: **Tolerance and Conflict Resolution in Uganda and Rwanda**

by Megan Rubiner Zinn

On an unseasonable chilly day in late April 2015, nine Africans took their seats in a conference room at the Smith College School for Social Work. The six men and three women from Uganda and Rwanda were excited, curious, and feeling rather cold. Their hosts, Smith professor Josh Miller and his colleagues, promised to provide sweaters and warm drinks. Then they launched into a six-week exchange program that would transform their work and their lives.

This introductory session was the start of the Professional Fellows Program: Tolerance and Conflict Resolution in Uganda and Rwanda, an innovative project led by Miller and funded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). It is part of the State Department's Professional Fellows Program, which brings young, emerging leaders from around the world to the United States for intensive fellowships. Miller developed the project with Julie Hooks of Amherst's Institute for Training & Development (ITD), fellow SSW professor Marsha Kline Pruett, and SSW adjuncts Adin Thayer and Leah Krieger.

Miller came to this project after years of work in regions of the world devastated by natural disaster and armed conflict. His expertise is in psychosocial capacity building in the wake of disasters, and he has been involved in the response to 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Aurora, Colorado, shootings, the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Haitian earthquake, and the Sichuan province earthquake in China. Most recently, his work has brought him to Northern Uganda, where he collaborates with local leaders of communities healing from the region's long-standing conflicts.

The Professional Fellows grant was particularly exciting to Miller because it required the participation of two non-U.S. countries, allowing him the opportunity to work with Rwandans as well as Ugandans. He knew it would be a fruitful pairing; while the bordering countries have both survived devastating armed conflicts and disruptions, Rwandans have had nearly twenty years of peace-building and reconciliation, while Ugandans are at the start of this process. Although many institutions received the State Department grant this year, Smith is the only one working with sub-Saharan African countries, and it is one of the few focused on peace and conflict resolution.

The project brought two groups of Africans to the United States; the first arrived in the spring of 2015 and the second arrived in the fall. The fellows spent one week in training and three weeks as interns at social services organizations. After their return to Africa, representatives from the organizations with which they worked will visit them to experience first-hand the fellows' work in their communities.



The African Fellows program provides an opportunity for the School for Social Work to broaden its global impact and extend the School's mission to train social workers who engage in community-based, collaborative, and culturally-specific clinical practice. It has the potential to have a significant impact on the work of conflict resolution and on clinical social work training in the U.S. and abroad. The fellows return home with new skills and practices in peace-building and community healing, which they can adapt to their organizations' needs and share with colleagues. Further, the American participants in the project are able to take new professional strategies and perspectives from the African fellows and enrich their organizations' efforts.

Miller and ITD worked with partner NGOs in Uganda and Rwanda to choose participants. The fellows—teachers, religious leaders, community organizers, and clinicians—are all young leaders helping their communities heal from legacies of armed conflict and trauma. Adjuncts Adin Thayer and Leah Krieger identified local organizations involved in social justice—the Pioneer Valley Project, Arise for Social Justice, the Performance Project, the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School, Project Coach, Safe Passage, and the Franklin County Sheriff's Office—then they developed internships that dovetailed with the professional work of the fellows.

The spring group of fellows began with a week of orientation and training meetings on the Smith campus, along with lectures, site visits, and cultural outings. The organizers were struck by how fully everyone embraced the training, the way they collaborated with each other, and how quickly they bonded.

"They were really responsive and they didn't just take it passively," said Miller. "They interacted with it and helped shape it so it really met their needs."

"The participants from both countries are consulting with each other," said Miller, after observing the first days of intercultural dialogue. "The Rwandans are thinking of questions about psychosocial needs that Ugandans will give them feedback on. The Ugandans have questions about the peace and reconciliation process that the Rwandans will give them feedback on."

The Rwandans spoke frankly of their experiences in the 1994 genocide, and the efficacy of *gacaca*, their community-based peace and reconciliation process, in facilitating healing. The Ugandans were skeptical that a similar process would be possible in their country, but they were convinced by the Rwandans that they must engage in such a process.

"It had more resonance and power coming from them than it would from us," said Miller.

Following the training, the participants deepened their skills and formed close relationships with the colleagues at their internships.

Agnes Umutesi, a Rwandan fellow working in domestic violence prevention, interned with Safe Passage, Northampton's shelter for survivors of domestic violence. She has extensive experience running groups for men, but this was her first time seeing strategies to protect women. While there are great cultural differences between the two countries and how they deal with gender-based violence, Safe Passage gave Umutesi a model of what is possible.



Patrick Onguti Okello of Uganda, who worked with Arise, was inspired by the agency's deep roots in the community and its ability to respond to needs, even with challenges and setbacks. According to Miller, Okello was deeply affected by the determination and optimism of his Arise colleagues, and it gave him hope that his country could heal, in spite of difficult odds.

Evelyn Akidi, also of Uganda, worked at the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School in Holyoke. According to Adin Thayer, Akidi found the experience very eye-opening. Coming from an educational model that is structured and hierarchical, it surprised her to see the school's more democratic approach, in which students are able to question and disagree with their teachers and offer their own perspectives. While she would not be able to implement this model at her school in Northern Uganda, she can raise questions and incorporate some of this approach in teaching.

The American social services professionals who hosted the fellows were equally inspired by their colleagues, especially by what they have accomplished under very difficult conditions. They spoke of how it expanded their thinking to see how broadly the Africans view counseling: incorporating people with training outside

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of clinical work, taking a community approach to healing, and using a wide range of approaches, including music and dance.

Once they completed the internships, the fellows traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in a three-day Professional Fellows Congress. Leah Krieger attended, as well, and called it “one of the best things I’ve ever done.” She found it particularly powerful to see so many young leaders—222 individuals from 43 countries—engaged in this work of transforming their countries.

Everyone involved in the first phase of Miller’s African Fellows project was elated by its success. Without exception, the fellows strengthened their professional skills and learned a great deal about the work culture in the U.S. They were inspired to see how hard their American colleagues worked and how much confidence and passion they brought to their professions. Many of the fellows also spoke about the extensive cooperation they saw in the workplace and among different organizations. Throughout their internships, the fellows were extremely open to the different models they experienced and the diversity of people with whom they worked.

“I think they all left feeling really inspired and united about possibilities of what they could do in their communities,” said Krieger.

The success of the program also was evident in the fellows’ bonding and openness to listening, learning and teaching.

These connections will be key as they move forward in their work. Already, the participants are Skyping with each other and with their American colleagues, and they are making plans to collaborate on projects in their home countries.

All of the U.S. staff members spoke of how transformative the project was for them, as well. Krieger was particularly struck by the opportunity to learn how other countries deal with their problems. Miller called it the best project of his career, and spoke of how enjoyable it was, both in hard work and moments of relaxation.

“We’re talking about genocide and armed conflict and yet there was this sense of being alive and there were many joyful moments,” said Miller. “We sang and we danced. We laughed a lot together.”

The second phase of the program took place this summer, when four of the fellows’ U.S. internship colleagues traveled to Rwanda and Uganda in the follow-on stage of the project. The program began again with different fellows in the fall and Miller hopes to renew the grant to continue the project. Miller also is looking for ways that this first group and future fellows can connect and communicate regularly, continuing to share ideas.

“What we’re trying to do is create a network of young professional leaders in both countries who can make a difference and transform their societies,” said Miller.



**Joshua Miller, Ph.D.**, is a professor at the Smith College School for Social Work. His primary areas of interest are anti-racism work and psychosocial capacity building in response to disasters. Prior to teaching, Miller worked for 20 years as a community organizer, family therapist, group worker, and researcher and as the director of public and private nonprofit child and family welfare agencies.