

Applied Peacebuilding: From Classwork to Fieldwork

By Rebecca Krisel

Jonathan Carral with his students,
fellow teachers, and boys from an
orphanage they visited.



In the spring semester, SIPA students specializing in conflict resolution can take the applied peacebuilding course taught by SIPA alumnus Zachary Metz MIA '01.

The course, which emphasizes the practical skills in peacebuilding, requires students to develop a fieldwork project that can be implemented as a summer internship.

I spoke with Jonathan Carral, MIA '16, a human rights and humanitarian policy concentrator who took the course in the spring of 2015 and completed his summer internship in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The following is an edited version of our conversation from January 28, 2016.

What program were you working with in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

My summer internship took place in the eastern city of Goma in the DRC. I had the opportunity to work with Justice Rising International, a small grassroots nonprofit that specializes in education initiatives and building schools in conflict zones.

I worked with the boys to discuss questions of influence, change, identity, and power dynamics in order to inspire them and expand their understanding of what it means to be a hero.

What drew you to this program specifically?

I was in touch with Justice Rising even before starting the class. I had received a Davis Projects for Peace grant to build a vocational training center with Justice Rising for former combatants in the nearby village of Kalembe, which is in close proximity to rebel forces. In addition to rehabilitation, the center also provides help for the many children at risk of military recruitment. The hope is that former child soldiers will learn practical job skills in an apprentice-like atmosphere that will enable them to find jobs and forge a different path.

Prior to coming to SIPA, I had worked with orphan and vulnerable youth in India, China, and Mozambique and saw many similarities in the lives and identities of street children. I wanted to apply the knowledge I gained from those experiences to a conflict zone like the DRC.

Can you describe a typical day in Goma?

After having breakfast with my team, I'd take a motorcycle to school, inside an IDP [Internally Displaced Persons] camp. My primary responsibility was to teach a group of teens participating in the Freedom Boys program, which works to rehabilitate and assist former child soldiers transitioning back into postconflict society. This included teaching a six-week summer English class as well as leading weekly group discussions focused on reenvisioning heroism. Despite horrible abuses, many former child soldiers leave the military with a skewed understanding of heroism and courage. As a result, I worked with the boys to discuss questions of influence, change, identity, and power dynamics in order to inspire them and expand their understanding of what it means to be a hero.

We had to be back home at 5:00 p.m., which we called the witching hour...and that was very real. There were no streetlights, and it felt dangerous.

Can you describe a moment that had a lasting impression on you?

We got word of an attack on a nearby village, where the local head had familial contacts. It was in the Beni region, and the attacks had been going on for some time. I went with my team from Justice Rising to interview the victims. These are the kinds of attacks that go undocumented in the news, as if they never happened.

We arrived by plane and were immediately taken by car to a compound. We were there for just two days. The first day we explained to some community leaders that we wanted to speak to those who experienced these horrendous attacks, get their stories in writing, and distribute them abroad to bring attention

to their plight. The next day, we ran seven hours of interviews and spoke to 14 people. It was the most heart-wrenching experience of my life.

You think you know, but you really don't. Just one after another, after another, and that's when I had night terrors. It was the smallest way that I could begin to comprehend or empathize with the terrors that plagued these people's lives on a daily basis. You hear about a mother who watched her child being killed in the raid and having to carry her dead body back to the village.

What lessons did you learn from your experience in Goma?

There is a level of responsibility that comes with having worked with vulnerable populations over a long period of time. I, myself, have been in this line of work since I was 18. Where it was once permissible to mourn and be sad about the things I witnessed, DRC represented the point in my career where I was no longer afforded the luxury of being just a sorrowful Western outsider, but rather, someone who had to be compelled by my feelings of sorrow to actually do something. To take personal responsibility and funnel my emotions into action. With all the injustices that the people of Congo are forced to confront on a daily basis, my tears won't make the difference. But maybe, if I steward discontent well, my hands will.

What are your career plans, and how will they incorporate peacebuilding?

In the short term, I plan to work within the professionalized peacebuilding field in order to strengthen my managerial and logistical skills. Long term, I intend to start my own organization building community-based child centers around the world. These centers would house homeless and orphaned children while providing education, medical treatment, food, and other essential needs. To me, peacebuilding looks like investing in the most destitute members of a society and training them up to be the change their nation's needs.