

How Storytelling Is Helping Ex-Child Soldiers Overcome Their Past

Through community-driven education programs, Justice Rising is bringing peace to war-torn areas.

By Emily Becker

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Cassandra and Edison Lee have always believed in the power of stories. When she was 10, it was the stories of the Congo conflict that instilled in Cassandra a deep desire to help bring about peace to war zones. Years later, it was hearing the stories of survival from those in an internally displaced persons camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo that showed Cassandra and Edison that despite the area's history of trauma, there is still hope for the future.

And now, it is through stories that communities are rebuilding and learning how to write different ones in the future.

The program is one of many outreach efforts from Justice Rising, the organization Cassandra and Edison founded that strives to rebuild war-torn areas through community-driven education. Through hyperlocal partnerships, Justice Rising has built seven schools in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and served 1400 students in the most marginalized areas of the country.

"The best way to really help communities to overcome extreme poverty and even disrupt cycles of war is by helping people to find alternative opportunities in life," Edison told A Plus. "For me, it made a ton of sense that education is one of the best, and one of the most nuclear ways, to effect change in these communities."

At each Justice Rising school, the students are taught the typical subjects taught in schools around the world, but additionally, the curriculum includes lessons with a heavy focus on character building. Students at their schools have often been child soldiers or victims of sexual violence, and some have watched their families be killed in front of their eyes. Trying to teach them without addressing this context, Cassandra and Edison feel, would be an extreme disservice to their students.

"You can plant a school and teach them the basics, but looking at how we can shift mindsets is also really important to us, to look how we bring that community out of the cycle of war when a lot of these kids only know war," Cassandra told A Plus. "In some areas, war's been going on for 20-plus years. To bring them out requires teaching them conflict resolution skills and character development, trauma work. It's a lot of multi-faceted trainings that we do."

While the areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo in which Justice Rising has established schools might currently be experiencing peace, the history of conflict and fear that it will return ripples through the day-to-day interactions in the communities. Cassandra and Edison explained that, as almost everyone has experienced trauma, individuals in the country don't always see the value in telling their own stories. From a mental health perspective, though, talking about the past has various benefits in

helping someone move forward.

"They've seen so many horrors and been a part of war for decades," Edison said. "We can't bring in a psychologist for every individual, how can we train the community to tell their stories with each other to help each other overcome these traumas?"

Along with the therapist on their team, Cassandra and Edison developed a program in which their students, especially the boys, would learn how to tell their stories and how to heal through talking about their pasts. To get students to join, they offered anyone who would sign up for the program, called Leadership League, free soccer equipment if they pledged to commit to school, attend counseling and lay down their arms.

At first, they were concerned that the students were only showing up for the soccer equipment, but with the program now in its fourth year, Cassandra and Edison are starting to notice changes in the students.

Recently, Cassandra was talking with Jackson, one of the leaders in the program. He told her that, when he was younger, his family and friends had been killed in front of his eyes. When the conflict had ended, and he was trying to settle back into his community, many of the people who he watched kill others were now his neighbors. He had struggled to live near the people who were responsible for his family's death.

"I had to decide what I was going to do and how I was going to respond," Cassandra recalled Jackson telling her.

He said his first instinct was anger. He wanted to get even. But instead, he went to the Leadership League and talked about what was going on.

"I had learned in this community group that we're supposed to forgive and we're supposed to love people," Jackson told Cassandra. "So, I went back and I was able to forgive them and live peacefully with all these people as my neighbors."

These seven schools are only the beginning for Justice Rising. That they have been able to achieve gender parity in their schools and that their students are consistently landing in the top percent on national exams is something that they hope to continue to build on. This year, they hope to establish eight more schools and are aiming to have built 40 schools by 2020. They are currently working to set up channels through which they can support schools in Aleppo, Syria and Mosul, Iraq.

"When we say that we're looking to end war, obviously that's a huge statement," Edison said. "I think what we mean is that, in places like Congo, where it is a failed state and other fragile and failed states like it, I think the traditional approach is to attack it from the top down, and we're really trying to approach it from the bottom up and really work with individual communities at the localized level."