





ZACHARY KAUFMAN

'96

Combating genocide
and building peace

BY CRISTINA ROUVALIS

PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY ZACHARY KAUFMAN

In 1994, 15-year-old Zachary Kaufman '96 was deeply troubled by the appalling images trickling out of Rwanda. Shootings on the street. Mass graves. A caravan of people fleeing their homes, their belongings balanced precariously on their heads.

It's happening again, he thought. *Genocide*. The 100-day massacre in East Africa harkened back to the Holocaust and his own relatives' torment at the hands of Nazi Storm Troopers.

Kaufman, then a sophomore at Shady Side Academy, wondered why no one was intervening to stop the violence in Rwanda. He wanted to speak out against the crimes, but he was just a teenager in Pittsburgh, halfway around the world. What could he possibly do?

Much and more, as things turned out. Nineteen years later, Kaufman has worked at the international tribunal prosecuting war criminals in Rwanda, written or edited three books concerning genocide, and given lectures on the conflict at universities and embassies around the world. Kaufman also worked tirelessly to open the first public library in Rwanda.

"He is very, very compassionate," said James Kimonyo, the Rwandan ambassador to the United States. "He has been very vocal in getting the issue of genocide out. He has been a very strong voice on behalf of the survivors of genocide. He has researched the issue of how genocide is committed and why people would hurt each other in

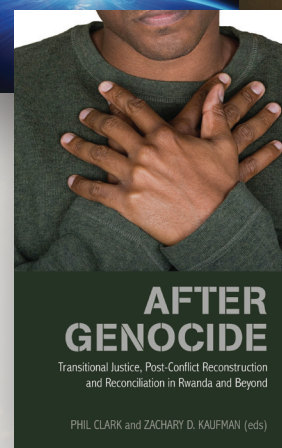
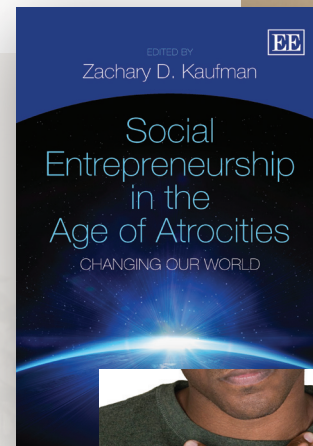
such terrible ways. He is an outspoken professional to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Despite all of his accomplishments, Kaufman still looks back with regret at 1994, when he stood by helplessly, watching the slaughter unfold on television. "I wish I could talk to my younger self back then," he said. "I could have lobbied our representatives to intervene. I could have launched a public awareness campaign because there was so little news coverage of the genocide. I could have fundraised for humanitarian aid organizations. I wish I could tell that high school version of myself that everyone has an obligation to stop genocide. That is one of the lessons I share in my writing and speaking today."

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Kaufman is tireless in spreading that message. In fact, when people look at his resumé, they ask, "Do you sleep?" (Answer: Yes. Just less than the rest of us.)

How else to explain all the accomplishments he's fit into 34 years? He's a fellow at Yale Law School, Yale's Genocide Studies Program, and the Yale School of Management's Program on Social Enterprise. He's a





Rwanda's first public library, complete with 70 computers, opened last year. Kaufman was surrounded by Rwandans who hugged him and expressed gratitude.



visiting faculty member at New York University. He's on an international book tour for the second of his three books, *Social Entrepreneurship in the Age of Atrocities: Changing Our World*. He's a Term Member of the Council on Foreign Relations and on the Board of Directors of the Association of Marshall Scholars. He's an attorney and a regular Voice of America commentator. The list goes on and on.

"As impressive as his resumé is, that's just the tip," said Jim Mitre '96, his longtime friend. "If there is a modern Renaissance man, it would be Zach. For most people, you have to pick one thing in life and go with it. Zach has overcome that problem by doing everything well. He was always into a million things."

Kaufman grew up in Morgantown, W.Va., an inquisitive kid who excelled in math and science. He knew early on he would not become a doctor like his father. Dr. Howard Kaufman, a brain surgeon, sometimes invited his sons Zach and Zeke '95 into the operating room. As inspiring as the surgery was, it turned Zach's stomach.

Kaufman was always a small kid, and skipping kindergarten only served to spotlight his naturally slight build. When he announced his intentions to play the bass drum in the middle school marching band, his mother was doubtful. "Zach, this is too heavy," she said,

holding up an instrument nearly as large as her seventh-grade son. Undeterred, he slung it over his shoulder and marched.

In some ways, it was an idyllic childhood filled with friends and hiking and rock climbing in the nearby woods. But being a Jewish minority wasn't always easy. One day during second grade, another boy yelled anti-Semitic taunts at him on the playground. The bully picked up Kaufman and banged his head against a rock until it bled, he recalled.

Kaufman was so bewildered, he didn't tell anyone for years. Why would someone who didn't even know him hate him just because of his religion? "It was the first time I had encountered discrimination and hate," he said. The bullying was a defining moment, one that later led him to research the fate of his relatives in Eastern Europe — both the survivors and those who died in the Holocaust.

But while these incidents may have sensitized him to cruelty and injustice, he maintained an optimistic outlook. His mother encouraged him to take risks, inspiring him with her own adventurous spirit. A native of South Africa who had grown up in Australia, she moved to New York City at age 22 without knowing a soul there. *You can't sit home and look at four walls*, she taught her sons. *You need to get out and work and explore*.

She taught Zach how to sew and cook so he could be self-sufficient. "You can be very good at books but not adept at life," she said. "I wanted him to be well-rounded."

Those skills came in handy when Kaufman transferred to Shady Side Academy in high school. "Boarding at such a stimulating, diverse private school in a major city shaped me in more ways than I will ever know," he said. From the chemistry taught by the late David Weill to the history lessons imparted by Susan Rhodes to the Chinese poetry recited by Mei-Wang

Shao, his world opened up.

But he didn't tie himself to his desk. He joined in on pranks in the dorm and rigged up a pirate radio station with a transmitter and antenna. To his classmates' delight, he even invented his own call-in show complete with humorous characters. "From a small frame came a big personality," said his classmate and regular listener Arvind Grover '96. "Zach was so outgoing and so confident without being arrogant. He was always laughing and telling a story, making you feel like you were special in that moment."

Kaufman (who'd grown into his drum) was president of the concert band and percussion section leader. He wrote for the *Academian*, served as an admissions tour guide, and tutored in writing and math.

He even blossomed into an athlete at SSA. During a game of pickup basketball his freshman year, he was no one's idea of a jock. The players towering over him swatted his shots away like flies. Someone walked up to Kaufman and suggested that perhaps he might be better suited for another sport. What about wrestling?

So he joined the team, wrestling in the 103-pound weight class. At first, he lost all of his matches. But one day, he shocked his teammates and himself with a victory. He went on to pin numerous opponents, including one in just 14 seconds and became co-captain of the team. He credits Coach Tim Giel with changing him from "a scrawny, shy little kid into a stronger, more confident — okay, still little — young man."

When the cum laude graduate was accepted on early admission to Yale, Grover joked that he was a "FPA — Future President of America. We knew he was going places." But they did not realize that he would take the road less traveled — the humanitarian route.

At Yale, Kaufman was not only an academic standout, but also student body president, a freshman residential counselor, co-captain of the wrestling team, and an All-American and Runner-up National Champion in the National Collegiate Wrestling Association. You name it, he was doing it. But in the back of his mind was Rwanda.

The country became front and center when he read about the war crimes tribunal the United Nations set up for it, and he decided to do his senior independent study on the court's mistakes and problems.

After graduating from Yale with a bachelor's degree in political science, he would go on to get a Ph.D. in international relations at Oxford University as a Marshall Scholar and a JD at Yale Law School. But before he distinguished himself in graduate work, he applied for government posts. After submitting his report on Rwanda to the U.S. Department of Justice, he was hired to work on its post-genocide justice initiative.

In February 2001, he landed in the country that had haunted him since his adolescence. The moment the plane touched down, he thought of West Virginia — hilly terrain, lush farmland, and friendly people.

But there was one thing he had never seen before — genocide sites. He felt obligated to visit as many as he could, taking in the skeletal remains, torn clothes, and blood stains from the atrocities in 1994 that he calls "100 days of hell."

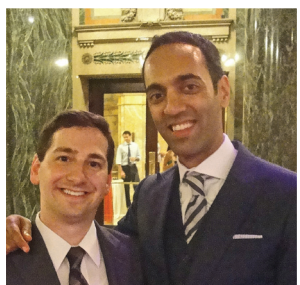
"Unless you see the actual evidence, you don't understand the enormity, the cruelty of it," he said.



"He is a humble guy. He is never talking about him getting credit or reading his bio. Every time you meet him, it's 'What can we do to improve the lives of people in Rwanda?' "



“If there is a modern Renaissance man, it would be Zach. For most people, you have to pick one thing in life and go with it. Zach has overcome that problem by doing everything well.”



“There are blood stains on walls where babies were thrown. It is one thing to read or hear about it. It’s another to see it in front of your face.”

On that first trip, a Foreign Service officer took him to a meeting of the Rotary Club of Kigali-Virunga. The Rotarians were discussing how Rwanda did not have a public library. They wanted to build the first one. Kaufman, who had always loved libraries, was shocked that a country in the 21st century lacked such a fundamental civic institution. He knew that access to information was especially important in Rwanda. Hutu hardliners used the newspaper and radio stations to incite genocide against the Tutsi, even orchestrating the slaughter by publicizing the whereabouts of individuals. Without any outside information, he said, the drumbeat of hate was even louder.

He immediately contributed his own money to the project. Back in Washington, he started the American Friends of the Kigali Public Library. He had no idea how daunting the task would turn out to be.

For starters, he was rebuffed by potential donors, who believed Rwanda was not stable or literate enough for such a big undertaking. A few even insinuated that Rwandans would use books as weapons against each other.

Once money began trickling in, Kaufman and other leaders struggled with training volunteers, who were often enthusiastic at first, but sometimes failed to follow through with work. Kaufman and other leaders finally had to tell these volunteers that they would have to fulfill



their responsibilities if they wanted to continue working on the project.

Then there were the books themselves. Many were donated by well-meaning people who cleaned out attics and bookshelves. But too often they were out-of-date textbooks or dusty tomes that had to be transported at great expense to East Africa.

The library organizers wanted to fill the limited shelves with a collection specializing in Rwandan and African history and literature, great works of fiction and non-fiction, children’s books, and humanities, science, and reference books. Rejecting most piecemeal donations, they partnered with two nonprofits that helped them collect the books, catalog them, and transport them to Rwanda.

Kaufman did much of his fundraising back in Washington, D.C., working alongside Rwandan Grace Nkubana, treasurer and board member of the American Friends of the Kigali Public Library.

One day Nkubana hosted a birthday party for Kaufman and was stunned when all of the guests showed up bearing not gifts but donations to the library at his request. “It takes a special person to give up his birthday,” she said. “He has a humongous heart.”

She had seen so many other relief workers in Rwanda come and go through a revolving door of high hopes and then disillusionment. “Other people would say of the Rwandans, ‘They are lazy. They are not working hard enough.’ But Zach never judged. He understood the people in Rwanda had gone through so much. He encouraged them and understood their culture. And he never ever gave up on the library.”

Ambassador Kimonyo agrees. “He is a humble guy. You don’t call him doctor or professor. He is never talking

about him getting credit or reading his bio. Every time you meet him, it's 'What can we do to improve the lives of people in Rwanda?' "

The gleaming library – complete with 70 computers, wireless Internet, and 25,000 books – opened last year. Kaufman brought his father over for the October inauguration ceremony, in which he was surrounded by Rwandans who hugged him and expressed gratitude.

Besides building for the future, Kaufman also exhumed the past by working at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (one of three international tribunals at which he has served).

He interviewed survivors of the genocide who inevitably asked, "Why didn't anyone help?" One person even told him how he envied the silverback gorillas that lived in Rwanda's forested highlands. "When one of those gorillas is killed," he told Kaufman, "everyone cares. But when a million of my people were killed, no one cared."

Kaufman also interviewed people who committed the atrocities. While some were defiant, others struck him as disturbingly ordinary – hardly the monsters he expected to find. "Some even looked pathetic," he said. "What we really need to understand is: Why do ordinary people perpetrate extraordinary acts of cruelty?"

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When Kaufman is not staring into the eyes of mass murderers or investigating crimes against humanity, he is actually a fun guy with almost 4,000 friends on Facebook. He loves an action movie and appreciates a good pun. "He is funny, but in a very benign way – very playful and borderline cheesy," Mitre said. "He doesn't take himself so seriously."

He bungee jumped off Victoria Falls and has gone sky diving a few times – not because he is a daredevil, but because he likes to work hard and play hard.

His fiancée, Elizabeth Katz, said she loves his entertaining stories. Like the time he was in an airplane

in Africa, looked out the window, saw water, and realized he was going to the wrong destination. When he asked the flight attendant, she told him that more people wanted to go to the other place. When he protested, she told him he could give a speech and try to convince the other passengers to change course.

So midair, he stood up in the aisle and made his plea to reroute the plane. For once his oratory skills let him down. The other passengers voted no. When he convinced the flight crew to return him to the point of origin, they dropped him off out in the middle of nowhere, forcing him to hitchhike back to civilization.

His ill-fated flight not only gave him a good story to tell, it taught him the kind of lesson you don't learn in a college classroom. "I learn so much from going out and doing things. Now I understand not all your transportation is always going to work out. Leave a little extra time. And you have to stay cool and be flexible."

For someone so driven, he is surprisingly laid back when things go wrong, Katz said. "He has spent so much time studying genocide and other atrocities that it puts things in perspective. When things don't go exactly as planned, he realizes it is not such a big deal."

Despite his outsized worth ethic, he never thinks twice about dropping what he is doing and mentoring or advising someone, especially those who want to do human rights work. "It might be a friend's girlfriend's younger brother's roommate," Katz said. "He will speak to anyone who has questions about traveling or conducting research in Africa, wants advice about starting a nonprofit abroad, or seeks personal or professional mentoring more generally."

For Kaufman, losing a little sleep is worth it to help people and prevent the terrible images that have haunted him since age 15. As Nkubana puts it, "He is a very educated person. He could walk anywhere and be a rich young man. But that is not Zach. He thinks about other people rather than himself. He has an unusual calling."

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