

Learning From History How To Change Tomorrow's World For The Better

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Seventh grade students at Independent Day School-Corbett Campus (IDS-CC) were barely a year old when the Rwandan genocide of 1994 took place. Therefore, this modern day massacre could just as well be ancient history for them, especially since it took place half a world away on a continent vastly different from their own.

That is, it could have been considered ancient history until middle school humanities teacher Christina Thomas and English teachers Lynne Grigelevich and Jen Jagdmann made it a relevant and real lesson for their students. Applying an integrated curriculum approach, they enabled students to make poignant and powerful connections to an atrocity to humanity – connections emanating from their own hearts that could help them change the world for the better.

As part of their study about the continent of Africa in humanities class, students began the Rwandan unit by analyzing the many problems in Africa today and how they originated. “I wanted the students as global citizens to gain a sense of perspective about modern day Africa,” said Thomas. “We reviewed the history of colonialism in Africa and how its legacy contributed to the state of African countries today. This included the conditions that led to the Rwandan genocide.”

Next, students researched the Rwandan genocide focusing on how power can divide a nation. They discussed and wrote papers about the 100 day period during which groups of extremist Hutu militia slaughtered approximately one million ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. “Then we started making connections between what happened in history, what’s happening now, and what will happen in the future,” said Thomas. “We discussed in detail the question, ‘How does remembering the past change the future?’”

This global perspective was further explored on an individual and personal level in English class as lessons in history were integrated with life lessons about responsibility for fellow human beings and the power of forgiveness. Students read excerpts from Imaculee Ilibagiza’s book, *Left to Tell*, which relates her personal experience during the Rwandan genocide and her decision to offer forgiveness to those who slaughtered her family.

“Through short stories, written reflections and discussion, students explored how forgiveness can be one of the most freeing choices for others and for us,” said Grigelevich. “We discussed how forgiveness, challenging as it may sometimes be, enables us to move forward and go on living. We also discussed our personal responsibilities in helping raise awareness of and help put an end to human suffering.”

As part of the unit, the teachers invited Sister Pudentiana “Puddy” Kirungo, founder of the St. Therese the Little Flower Orphanage in Burundi who is temporarily living in Tampa, to visit the IDS-CC campus and share her first-hand experiences. Sr. Puddy described conditions in the small central African country, which has been under siege of a genocidal civil war for more than 10 years, and the effects on the nation’s children. Her message echoed that of Ilibagiza’s as she told students how children of both Tutsi and Hutu ethnicities are living together in the orphanage learning about forgiveness, responsibility and compassion despite meager resources and overwhelming tragedy. “In this way, they are a symbol to the adults that practicing forgiveness is possible.”

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“What can you as students do?” she asked. “Be thankful for everything you have. Use well the things you have. And forgive others in your life for even minor annoyances.”

“Naturally, our goal was for the students to come away from this unit more aware of what’s going on in the world,” said Grigelevich. “But we also wanted them to realize that they can help to change the world through their own actions -- by being forgiving, compassionate people who feel a responsibility for fellow human beings. The way they treat others does have a trickle affect on the entire world.”

Founded in 1968, Independent Day School-Corbett Campus is a fully accredited, independent school located on Orange Grove Drive in northwest Hillsborough County with 550 students from PreK3 through 8th grade. At IDS, all children experience learning in a nurturing and highly academic environment focused on excellence and developing a positive self-concept. IDS-CC has become recognized as an exemplary school with over 3,500 visitors observing and learning from and with IDS-CC teachers. For more information about IDS visit www.idsy.es.com.

Contact: Karen Waksman

Independent Day School-Corbett Campus

Telephone: (813) 961-3087