

“They’re coming closer!”

That’s what Alison Des Forges (deh-FORJ) heard when she answered her telephone in Buffalo, New York, on April 6, 1994.

The caller was her friend Monique Mujawamariya (MOO-ja-wa-ma-REE-a), a human rights activist in Rwanda (Ru-WAN-duh).

“They’ve taken three men,” Monique continued, “and shot them.”

How could Alison save her friend in Central Africa? She thought quickly. “Give the telephone to them . . . I’ll pretend I’m a White House person and . . . tell them to leave you alone.”

“That won’t help,” Monique responded. “Please take care of my children.” She hung up.

Alison couldn’t protect Monique from the militia that night. But, as an advisor in Rwanda for the international organization Human Rights Watch, she had already helped many other Rwandans.

Background

For hundreds of years, the two main groups, Hutu (HOO-too) and Tutsi (TOO-tsee), lived and worked together and often married. At the end of World War I, however, Belgium took control of Rwanda, assigned everyone to one group or the other, and put the minority Tutsis in charge. Hutus resented the powerful Tutsis. In 1959, they rebelled, murdering or exiling many Tutsis to neighboring Tanganyika (TAN-gan-YEE-ka), now Tanzania (TAN-zan-EE-uh).

Alison befriended refugees there in 1963,



**Make
More
NOISE!**

by Cynthia Levinson

when she taught English. Later, she went to Rwanda to study its history and language and loved the country's "thousand hills" and open grasslands. She returned for a year in 1980 with her family. Their interpreter taught Sandy, then 10, Igisoro (IG-ee-SOR-o), a math game played with pebbles. Girls nearby taught Jessie, then eight, dances and songs.

Promoting Equality at Home

In Buffalo, Alison helped start Sandy's and Jessie's school, bringing black and white students together. She helped them build gigantic maps

of Africa and explained it's disrespectful to call an African person's home a "hut," even if it's small.

Jessie says her mother believed "every single person is important. She quietly listened to anybody."

Genocide

Revisiting Rwanda as a volunteer for Human Rights Watch in the early 1990s, Alison watched the violence escalate. She and Monique risked their lives digging up bodies as evidence. Then, she wrote a report "to create . . . outrage about massacres of Tutsis." No one paid attention. Killings and retaliations continued.

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Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully together for hundreds of years, but in 1959 troubles between the two groups began and hundreds of thousands died in the 1990s. These Hutu are refugees returning to Rwanda from Eastern Zaire.

"Peacefully yet persistently."



ABOVE: Alison's students, all Rwandan, stand proudly with their teacher. **LEFT:** You're never too young to teach! Jessica and Mia give a geography lesson.




from America, Europe, and the United Nations to intervene. She hoped that, at least, they would block radio stations, which encouraged Hutus to kill. But, no country would invade Rwanda, and most foreigners, including U.N. peacekeeping troops, fled the chaos.

In the next 100 days, Hutus slaughtered 800,000 adults and children, 90 percent of them Tutsis. Other targets were Hutus, like Monique, who helped Tutsis.

Seeking Justice

Alison couldn't prevent the killing. But she could make sure murderers were brought to justice and victims' families were supported. During the genocide, a White House official advised Alison to "make more noise." She did, for the rest of her life.



On April 6, 1994, Rwanda's Hutu president died in a mysterious plane crash. Before saving herself by hiding in her ceiling, Monique alerted Alison: With no leader to restrain them, Hutus were rampaging.

Realizing Hutus intended to exterminate Tutsis, Alison begged officials

It started with the cows. *Three groups live in Rwanda. Tutsi originally meant someone who was "rich with cows." Hutu referred to people who worked for those who owned cows. The smallest group, the Twa, lived in forests and hunted rather than farmed.*



ABOVE: Teacher and peacemaker, Alison's love of all people guided her in all she did. **TOP RIGHT:** Alison gives a lesson to children on a camping trip. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** These children are painting a map of Africa.

She returned to Rwanda frequently to uncover bodies and weapons, listen to victims' stories, identify and find murderers, and interview the accused, some of them children, to help determine which were guilty. She published her findings in an 800-page report, "Leave None to Tell the Story," and testified for weeks at an international court that tried suspected murderers. Because Alison identified guilty Hutus and Tutsis, her life was threatened, and the Rwandan government denied her entry. She continued working from afar to keep the peace, Jessie says, "peacefully yet persistently."

Today

Alison helped Monique escape to Montreal, where she directs an organization supporting sick children and mothers. Monique's children

also live in Canada. When Alison learned her family's interpreter had been killed, she helped his children move to Buffalo and later attend college.

Alison died in a plane crash in 2009 on her way home from discussing Rwanda with British Members of Parliament. Thousands of people on three continents mourned her.

Rwanda today is not at war with itself. But, it is not at peace, either. Hutus and Tutsis live side-by-side, sometimes recognizing their attackers. Still, many Rwandans are hopeful, partly because Alison helped bring them justice.

"Demanding justice," she wrote, "is morally and legally right."

Cynthia Levinson is a former social studies teacher who writes fiction and nonfiction for young people.