



> BY BETH BROSNAN

> CLOSE-UP CLASS OF 2015

Giving Peace— and Dental Care— a Chance

In 2010, Donna Hackley '15 looked up from her busy life—a successful pediatric dental practice, a loving husband, two active adolescent daughters—and realized something was not right.

“I couldn’t figure it out,” Hackley says now. “I had all the blessings in the world. But something was missing.”

So Hackley set out to find it.

Her journey began with a four-day church retreat and led ultimately to UMass Lowell’s Peace and Conflict Studies Program, where she went on to earn a master’s degree in the program’s organizational leadership track.

This summer, it will culminate in Africa, when the University of Rwanda School of Dentistry graduates its very first class—a program that Hackley, together with dental medicine faculty from Harvard and the University of Maryland, helped launch.

Hackley, who hated to fly and had rarely traveled farther than Canada, has now made 15 trips to Rwanda, where she spends about six months of the year living in the capital city of Kigali, working alongside Rwandan dental professionals as they rebuild the country’s health care infrastructure, which had been devastated during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

When people tell her she’s making such a sacrifice, Hackley is quick to set the record straight. “This,” she says with a grin, “is completely selfish.”

Whatever was missing from her life has been filled to overflowing by meaningful work, the warmth of her Rwandan colleagues and the opportunity to bear witness to a country working for peace in the aftermath of unimaginable conflict.

“I’ve learned so much,” she says. “And I’m sure I get far more than I give.”

MORE EDUCATION, MORE IMPACT

Hackley’s road to Rwanda actually began in Doylestown, Pa., where she grew up. Her parents both made community service a priority, and she followed their example, doing volunteer work with her church and school.

Her interest in health care also began at home: her mother is a nurse, her father a dentist and Hackley worked in his office during summer vacations. She went on to graduate at the top of her class from BU’s School of Dental Medicine, and after completing a pediatric dentistry program at Boston Children’s Hospital/Harvard School of Dental Medicine, she opened a practice in Westford with two of her instructors. Along the way, she married her high school sweetheart Steve Hackley, now a senior vice president at Comcast, and had two daughters, Hannah and Cara.

Yet even as she sank her roots in Massachusetts and became active with her local parish, Hackley felt “called” by Africa, particularly by the escalating humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Together with her best friend, she collected two tons of donated school and first-aid supplies and shipped them to Darfur—a process that took over a year. “To have more impact,” she says, “I needed more education.”

In 2011, she found it. While attending a lecture by UML’s Greeley Peace scholar, Leymah Gbowee—the Liberian peace activist who would win the Nobel Peace Prize that same year—she learned the university had launched its Peace and Conflict Studies Program. She pored over course listings and decided to take a class called “Gender, Work and Peace,” even if it meant being “a mom in a room full of teenagers.”

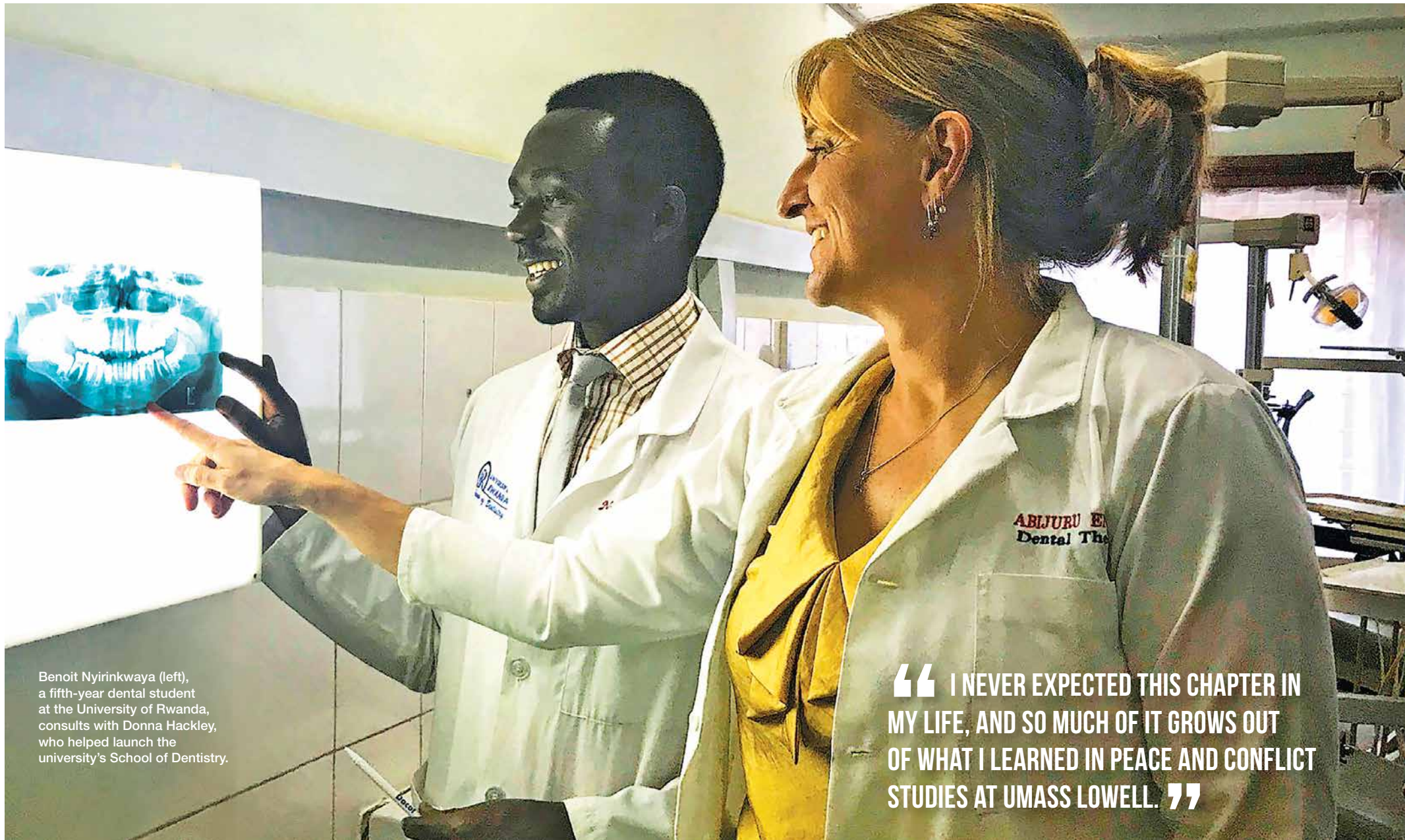
She needn’t have worried. Taught by then-program director Prof. Paula Rayman, the class was, she says, a portrait of diversity, as well as a conversion experience. “No one was like anyone else—they were different ages, from different countries and different walks of life. I fit right in.”

Hackley’s classmates included Gordon Halm, a Ghanaian-American who founded the African Community Center of Lowell, as well as students from Colombia, Nigeria and Syria. Many of them, she says, “carry unbelievable burdens. Yet instead of being vengeful, they’re working to change society for the better. They’re such a source of education and inspiration for me.”

She enrolled at UML as a part-time student and, with professors like Jim Nehring and David Turcotte, studied various peace-building efforts, focusing on Rwanda, which offered powerful lessons about how a country recovers from internal conflict. From the start, Rayman proved to be a knowledgeable and encouraging mentor, assuring Hackley that if she felt a strong calling, her path would emerge.

It did, almost by chance, at a fundraiser where one of the auction items was a football jersey belonging to famed Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver Lynn Swann—a sort of holy relic to Pennsylvania native Hackley. When the host learned she was a Steelers fan, she introduced her to Lynn’s brother, Brian Swann, who happened to be part of a Harvard team helping Rwanda open its first school of dentistry.

“The next thing you know, I’m on a plane to Rwanda,” marvels Hackley, who joined the Harvard team, led by Assoc. Dean Jane Barrow, as a part-time instructor in oral health policy and epidemiology at the Cambridge university. Faith—with a little help from football—had found a way.



Benoit Nyirinkwaya (left), a fifth-year dental student at the University of Rwanda, consults with Donna Hackley, who helped launch the university’s School of Dentistry.

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MORE EDUCATION, MORE HEALTH CARE

She arrived in Rwanda not quite 20 years after the genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 people, most of them ethnic Tutsis, were killed and nearly 250,000 women were raped in the space of 100 days. Conflict doesn’t come much starker than that—which makes the country’s subsequent efforts for peace and reconciliation all the more moving to Hackley.

“Rwandans know who’s who, and they still have to live side by side with the people they were fighting,” she says. “Yet they’re putting that aside to help their country heal, move forward and grow.”

To rebuild the country’s health care system, the government launched an ambitious seven-year program called Human Resources for Health (HRH) in partnership with more than 20 U.S. academic institutions and foundations. U.S. medical professionals like Hackley work alongside Rwandan colleagues to develop a curriculum and strengthen the faculty capacity and infrastructure of the country’s College of Medicine and Health Sciences—including the newly formed School of Dentistry. Hackley also co-led a team that conducted the country’s very first national oral health survey and observed a number of faith-based reconciliation programs.

From the start, she says, she was warmly welcomed, not only into the medical school, but also people’s homes—shown the best seat, served the largest portion at dinner, even comforted with traditional mourning rituals following the death of a relative. Again and again, she was struck by Rwandans’ emphasis on community and their resilience.

“The students want so much to learn, often in the face of challenges that would overwhelm many of us,” she says. “They want to serve the people in their country who need their care.”

This summer, 14 of those students will become the very first dentists to graduate from the University of Rwanda School of Dentistry. The following year, when the HRH partnership concludes, the Rwandan faculty will assume full control of the school’s operations. Observes Hackley: “This collaborative project really speaks to the talent and dignity of Rwandans who want to run their school as a center of excellence in a Rwandan-driven, self-sustainable way.”

What won’t end is Hackley’s relationship with a country she has come to love. Her family has now joined her on several trips to Kigali, and together with a Rwandan friend, Marcellin Kanimba, she has founded a beekeeping business called K+H Hilltop Honey. In addition to producing honey, the business has brought electricity and water lines to a rural neighborhood and provided jobs for local residents, including a group of deaf students who build Hilltop’s hives.

“I never expected this chapter in my life, and so much of it grows out of what I learned in Peace and Conflict Studies at UMass Lowell,” says Hackley. “I hope the work we do has a positive impact. I know it’s had an amazing impact on me.” [UML](#)