



Interview of the Month

Elizabeth Dearborn Hughes, Co-founder and CEO, Akilah Institute for Women, Kigali, Rwanda

1. GenderHopes: You co-founded the Akilah Institute in 2010 in Kigali, Rwanda. Can you tell us a bit more about the institute and its innovative education model for women?

Elizabeth Dearborn Hughes: The Akilah Institute for Women is the first and only women's college in Rwanda and Burundi. Akilah opened in January 2010 and is accredited by the Rwandan Ministry of Education. In 2014, a total of 340 students will enrol in the full-time, 3-year Diploma program at Akilah. We connect young women to economic opportunity by providing them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to launch their own ventures and find meaningful career opportunities. We focus on three of the fastest-growing industries in East Africa: entrepreneurship, hospitality management, and information systems. We work closely with local businesses and private sector leaders to develop our curriculum and ensure that students have the market-relevant skills necessary for employment.

Nearly 100 students have graduated from Akilah and we have a 95% job placement at graduation. Alumni are able to increase their income by 10x what it was before their studies. 97% of our students are the first in their family to attend higher education.

Our students undergo a visible transformation during their 3 years on campus. We have witnessed our alumni take leadership roles in their communities and use their new incomes to support the education of their younger siblings. They embody a shared passion for developing their country and creating jobs for their villages.

2. What originally inspired you to set up Akilah and what were some of the major challenges in doing so?

I grew up in the U.S. and learned about the Rwandan genocide when I was in college. I was fascinated by the reconciliation process and wanted to understand how a country rebuilds after such devastating tragedy. A million people were killed in the span of 100 days and the international community did nothing to intervene.

I moved to the capital of Kigali in 2006 to volunteer with grassroots education projects. In 2008, I met my husband Dave Hughes and we developed the vision for Akilah.



We were inspired by meeting Rwandan women who were desperate to continue their education and provide for their families. Unfortunately, university is an expensive option for a select few. In East Africa, only 1% of the population goes to university and about 30% of them are female. 80% of women in East Africa still work in subsistence agriculture, earning less than \$2 per day. We were determined to create an affordable model of higher education that was directly tied to the needs of the regional economy.

We were also deeply inspired by the leadership of the Rwandan government and their vision for a brighter future for their country.

A world leading 64% of the Parliament is women. The World Bank has called Rwanda the fastest reforming nation in the world. The country lifted 1.5 million people out of poverty in the last three years, increased lifespan and lowered infant mortality faster than any nation in history.

Remittances and foreign investment are both increasing. Inflation, which has been driven by rising global energy and food costs, is the lowest in the region. Rwanda now exports food, and overall, food security is the best in East Africa.

The Rwandan government and business leaders have been enthusiastically supportive of Akilah from the beginning. They fervently believe in the importance of providing economic opportunities to women, and recognize the need of qualified professionals in the workforce.

Dave and I were only 24 when we started raising the funds to support our vision (in 2008). We opened in January 2010 with just several thousand dollars. We had no idea how we were going to make payroll that semester! We were so committed to our students and the Akilah vision that we knew the necessary funds and resources would appear. For the first three years, we never had more than 5 weeks worth of operating expenses at any given time. We are now in our fifth year and we can demonstrate a solid track record and academic model. Akilah is now supported by thousands of individuals and family foundations in the US, UK, Australia, Hong Kong, and Switzerland.

3. Can you tell us more about your students and the types of challenges those women face?

70% of students come from rural communities across Rwanda and Burundi. Many of them have lost one or both parents and they face immense pressure to stay at home and help with domestic responsibilities, support other family members, and care for young siblings or relatives.

The Akilah tuition is \$3,500 USD per year, but students receive \$3,000 in



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scholarship. Students still struggle to find a way to pay their fees of \$500 and many take a student loan from a partner microfinance institution. The Akilah Career Development office helps students to find part-time jobs and internships to help cover some of this cost.

Our students are between the ages of 18-30. While some of them were born after the 1994 genocide, many of them were young children and have clear memories of the tragedy. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a serious challenge for many young women at Akilah.

4. What do you see as the biggest impacts the Institute has made to both its students and the community since opening?

Akilah alumni launch their careers and earn 10x more income than they did before joining Akilah. Alumni are using this income to send their younger siblings to school and contribute to their family's health and wellbeing. These young women are now role models to the girls in their neighbourhoods. They provide hope and inspiration to poverty-stricken communities.

5. In April, Rwanda marked the 20th anniversary of the genocide, which killed over 1 million people in 100 days. What do you see as the major challenges for the Institute and your students over the coming years?

Akilah students marked the 20th commemoration of the genocide by launching a beautiful campaign, [#iamrwanda](#), to challenge preconceived notions about what it means to be a Rwandan today. They have a tremendous amount of hope and optimism for their country's future.

As we complete our 5th year at Akilah, our first priority is to further improve and deepen the quality of our academics. Due to our limited budget, we never invested in textbooks, so instructors just made photocopies of select readings. We now want to purchase e-readers for all students so that they can access textbooks and thousands of books. We need to hire more professors with significant teaching experience, invest in curriculum development for our new major in Information Systems, and purchase more computers for our labs.

6. Akilah Institute opened a campus in Bujumbura, Burundi in January 2014. What are the similarities and differences between the two campuses?

Two years ago, a group of Burundian government leaders requested Akilah to open a campus in their country. Burundi's civil war ended in 2005 and they are currently the 4th poorest country in the world. Unfortunately, they have not developed the infrastructure and policies necessary for the type of growth and



economic development seen in Rwanda. They face many challenges related to corruption, poverty, and a crumbling education system.

Yet, we believe that Burundi has a very bright future due to the rise of visionary and passionate leaders in the government and private sector. They have a long way to go, but we know that Akilah can play a critical role in rebuilding their economy and ensuring that young women have the professional skills to launch their own businesses. Our team spent over a year preparing for the opening of our campus and recruiting the best and brightest young women from across the country.

The Rwandan government has recently made significant investments in programs like One Laptop per Child and other initiatives to get technology into schools. In contrast, most Burundian Akilah students have never seen or used a computer before.

Our curriculum and academic model is the same on both campuses, and our Burundian leadership team works closely with the Burundian private sector to identify internship and job opportunities.

7. In 2012, Forbes Magazine named you as one of “The 5 Most Powerful Women Changing the World Through Social Entrepreneurship”. Do you have plans to expand your work and the Akilah model further?

The Akilah vision is to build future generations of women leaders and professionals in Africa through the development of a network of campuses and graduate 1,500 students by the year 2020. Governments and business leaders in other African countries have already approached us to inquire about expansion. In January, our second campus opened in the country of Burundi. This demonstrates that we have built a scalable model of education and economic empowerment. It is critical that we work closely with the business leaders in each community to ensure that our curriculum provides a direct link into employment and job creation.

The only investment with the possibility of infinite returns is the education of young women. They have a powerful ripple effect on their communities and countries. It is proven that women will invest 90% of their income into their family, whereas men will only invest between 30-40%

Akilah will play an influential role in educating and empowering the future leaders and entrepreneurs of Africa.