Taking a Written Account

Working under a short-term contract for the United Nations as an official court reporter at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (UN-ICTR) has had a profound affect on University of Minnesota, Crookston Alumna Jean (Fischer) Whalen, ’80 and ’09.

“At the genocide trials in Rwanda, I was on a ‘team’ of ‘English court reporters,’ as we were called,” Whalen says. “The Tribunal is actually located in Tanzania, which is a country in east Africa immediately adjacent to Rwanda. Because the United Nations’ (U.N.) two official languages are French and English, there were two separate “teams” of court reporters, one team providing daily transcripts in English and the other team providing daily transcripts in French. It was a fast-paced environment with some very unique challenges. The testimony could, at times, be incredibly gut-wrenching.”

The UN-ICTR is the forum where the people who were high up in the Rwandan government are being tried. “These ‘Accused,’ as they are referred to, are the government officials who planned and orchestrated the genocide,” Whalen says. “They weren’t the ones swinging the machetes; they were the ones giving the orders to other people to do the killing.

“The witnesses would be flown to and from Rwanda on a small U.N. plane,” Whalen continues. “I had the opportunity to fly to Rwanda on that plane for a weekend visit. Rwanda is a breathtakingly beautiful country with a climate like Hawaii’s. It’s hard to believe that such a tragic story could unfold in such a beautiful portion of the world. I visited some of the genocide memorial sites, and the experience was surreal.”

Although such sad, gruesome stories come out of Africa, there is something about the continent that Whalen describes as incredibly alluring, beautiful, and makes a person want to keep going back. “In Tanzania, where the UN-ICTR is located, the people are friendly, the climate is perfect, and the landscape is amazing.” She reflects. “Two-thirds of Tanzania’s land has been made into national parks. I was able to go on some really amazing safaris and also hiked on Mount Kilimanjaro twice.”

Whalen first saw an advertisement for short-term positions with the UN-ICTR in a newsletter from the National Court Reporters Association. She submitted her resume, and it wasn’t until eight months later that she was contacted by the UN about an assignment. “The UN hires people from all over the world,” she says, “I worked with a group of about 16 court reporters from the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Gambia, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.”

Growing up in Bismarck, N.D., Whalen decided to pursue a career in court reporting. She was glad to find a major at the University of Minnesota, Crookston Technical College because it was so close to home, had an outstanding reputation, and was accredited. “I am very glad I made the choice to attend the U of M, Crookston. My professors were encouraging, positive, and approachable. Classes were small, and the student-teacher ratio was a great benefit to students.”

During her second year at the U of M, Crookston, Whalen was a resident advisor. She credits this role as giving her the chance to get to know a great group of young women.

Students of the late 1970s, would also probably recall a popular nightspot in Crookston known as the Viking Disco. While there is a bit of hesitation about bringing it up, Whalen smirks and admits it is the place where she met her husband, Mike. They have been married 26 years and have two children, Sarah and Greg.

After graduating in 1980, she worked in Grand Forks, N.D., for two years and then Council Bluffs, Iowa, for five years as a freelance court reporter. Whalen and her husband relocated to the Twin Cities area in 1987 because they had started a family and wanted to be closer to relatives.

After moving to the Twin Cities, she worked as a freelance deposition reporter through an agency for about seven years, then she took a leap of faith and struck out on her own starting a small freelance court reporting agency of her own. After several years, she
sold the freelance agency in 2005 and accepted a position in state district court in St. Paul, Minn., where she currently works. Over the years, she has held several leadership roles on the board of the state court reporters association. She is currently union steward. In 2008, Whalen received the Minnesota Association of Verbatim Reporters and Captioners Distinguished Service Award. She is a Registered Diplomate Reporter and Certified Realtime Reporter.

She could have not have served with the U.N. without the support of her husband and children. Whalen’s experience is something she carries close to her heart. “I will never be the same,” she shares. “We reporters were continually amazed at the dignity of the witnesses who testified at the Tribunal. They never broke down on the witness stand, even when testifying about the horrific things that had happened to them and their families. I think I became much more of a global citizen. In the U.S., we are so insulated from much of what’s going on in the rest of the world. “Places like Rwanda are closer to us than we realize on this small, blue planet we share. These are real places with real people with real families who have real dreams and aspirations just like the rest of us. When it’s nighttime here, they’re enjoying our common sun. When it’s daylight here, they’re gazing upon the same stars that we gazed upon last night. In the end, we’re all just people who want peace, dignity, and a little happiness.”

Whalen values education. She graduated again from the U of M, Crookston in 2009 with a bachelor of science in applied studies, and she did it online.

A good advisor can help make the online experience very doable. “My advisor was Lynnette Mullins, and she was very good at working with me and helping me meet my objectives.

“Because I work full time, I could complete my class work on my time rather than adding a second commute to my busy workday,” Whalen says. “As long as a person has enough self-discipline to sit down and do the work, nothing beats the convenience of online classes. Another advantage is that as long as you have Internet access, you can keep up with your studies from anywhere in the world. Taking online classes allowed me the freedom to travel and still keep up with my classes without missing a beat.”

For Whalen, there was a lot of personal satisfaction involved in earning a degree.” The focus of my classes was in organizational psychology, which will help make me more effective in my role as a union steward representing court reporters in the State of Minnesota,” she says.

“I still really enjoy being a court reporter, so I will probably continue on in my current profession,” Whalen believes. “In the future, I may go back to Africa and work on a short-term contract with the UN again. I’m currently studying for the grad school admissions test and may continue on with my education and get a master’s degree in some branch of psychology perhaps organizational or experimental psychology.”

She believes that learning is a lifelong process. “Horizons were made to be broadened,” she says, “I can’t think of a better and more convenient way to do it than to take online classes!”

It is evident education has had a great influence on Whalen’s life. It certainly led her to experiences she would not have had without it and changed the way she views the role of global citizenship—an important and powerful lesson we all need to learn.