

## From Women alone... to Women together

In December of 2006, when CBC/Radio-Canada presented their documentary on the widows living in Kimironko, a suburb of Kigali, these women who were victims of the genocide, were portrayed as women alone and without hope. At that point, these women who had suffered great trauma from the horrors of the 1994 genocide and the loss of the husbands and many of their children, were almost cast aside as not being of use to society due to what they had suffered. The documentary was an appropriate depiction of their lives. While living in small homes built side by side by the government, they were from all parts of Rwanda, and did not know each other. They had lost all everything they had owned other than the clothes on their backs. Some of them were able to find children of relatives and friends that had also survived, and attempted to feed and nurture them, rebuilding families with the thought that if God saved them, they should be grateful. They lived by the charity of rare contributors, and some organizations that gave a bit of money from time to time for food.

Some went out in daytime to offer their services at construction sites as assistant masons. For those more suited to domestic work, they attempted to sell vegetables; in essence, they tried to scrape out a living any way they could. Their nights were haunted by nightmares of terrible memories of rape and of torture, and the emptiness in their hearts was like a bottomless abyss. The children could feel this inconsolable sadness. Hope and joy had disappeared...

Since the existence of the Centre César, they have regrouped and have learned various trades such as crafts, embroidery and sewing. They receive a small food donation each month, the school fees of their children are taken care of, and a free small medical clinic is there for their health concerns. More importantly, they have been freed from their solitude, have come to know each other, have created friendship networks, and they sing together while making products to be sold in Canada. A management committee was created for the sewing workshop, and another for the craft workshop, permitting the widows to gradually take care of their own business affairs. Their situation has improved, and they gradually gained confidence in themselves.

During 2008, the Centre César became registered as a non profit organization, under the laws of Rwanda. The widows who have been elected to the administrative council have a tenure of three years. Little by little, these courageous women are becoming administrators and business women.

The next step is to establish a collaboration with organizations of business women such as *Alberta Women Entrepreneurs*, *Women's Enterprise Centre of Manitoba*, and business women's groups of Quebec. First meetings were held with these organizations during the Canadian tour that took place in May and June, and the reception was excellent. During the course of the coming year, the mechanics of this collaboration will be established.

If another documentary were to be filmed today, we would see smiles on their faces, we would see the hope they emanate, and the pride they feel having accomplished what they have, to no longer live on charity, to be full fledged citizens who are part of the rebuilding of their country.

*Maman Nicole*



**From left to right in the front:** Dinah, 20 years old, secretary, she's a student; Claire, counsellor, 43 years old, she has 4 children aged 13 to 20. **In the back:** Léonie, president, 42 years old with 4 children aged 8 to 26; Marie, counsellor, 59 years old with one child aged 19; Béata, counsellor, 41 years old with 6 children aged 13 to 24; Salaam, counsellor, 57 years old, she has 5 children aged 12 to 22; Thérésie, treasurer, 67 years old, she has one daughter and 3 grandchildren.