

Ordinary people, extraordinary actions

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Inspired by two women named Rita — one her mother, the other a visitor from Rwanda — Victoria Trabosh co-founded an organization to aid survivors of Rwanda's genocide

Victoria Trabosh grew up in a Midwest middle-class family where, as she recalls, “Mom’s word was gospel.” And the wisdom that Rita Mae Clark Hoering imparted to her children, steeped in unconditional love, included faith in the idea all things are possible: Believe in yourself, and an ordinary person can accomplish extraordinary things.



by: PHOTOS COURTESY OF ITAFARI FOUNDATION - Victoria Trabosh plays with one of the Rwandan children in the child sponsorship program (November 2011).

Trabosh, who lost her mother to cancer in 1998, lived by her mother’s words as she forged her own life as a wife, mother, grandmother, community volunteer, executive coach, speaker and writer. Then in 2004, Trabosh met another Rita, someone who inspired her to embark on a project that has become her passion.

Rita Ngarambe was visiting Portland from Rwanda, the African nation torn apart by genocide in 1994. My people have no hope, Ngarambe told her new American acquaintance. Come to Rwanda.

And so it was that Trabosh went to Rwanda, returned to Oregon and co-founded the Itafari Foundation, dedicated to helping survivors of the genocide rebuild their lives.

Started in 2005, the small Portland-based foundation — Itafari means “brick” in the Kinyarwanda language — raised more than \$750,00 in its first seven years through fund raisers and donations. It provides micro loans, sewing machines,

goats and other goods to Rwandan families, and is also building a school in Rwanda.

“The wisdom in the Rwandan people is learning to forgive, though not to forget,” says Trabosh, 55, who lives in Lake Oswego. “I don’t know how they find forgiveness, but they do. That release from anger allows you to move on and create something.”

Changing priorities

There was a time — decades ago, before marriage and children, before Rwanda and Itafari — when the girl then known as Vicky Hoering had decided her goal was to appear on the cover of Time magazine before she was 30. “No particular reason, just to be great,” she admits. “It was more about fame than anything else.”

Then she met John Trabosh, a man 18 years her senior who had four children, the oldest just 6 years younger than Vicky. They were married in 1981. Vicky was 24. “If I can raise four kids at 24, I can do anything,” she told herself.

Her mother thought the match was a mistake — at first. Later, she admitted she’d been wrong. “You and John do belong together,” she told her daughter (the Traboshes will celebrate their 32nd wedding anniversary in August).

And as Trabosh dived into her new role as stepmother, she discovered her true purpose — being a great mom, as her own mother had been. “I had great training from Mom — she was always so wise with me,” she says. “Those kids gave me a chance, and I didn’t blow it, and they didn’t either.”

After the family moved from Cleveland to Oregon in 1982, Trabosh started volunteering with Clackamas County, working with seniors, and eventually started her own business, VHT Conservatorship. Later she worked for US Bank and then became an executive coach, going full-time with that business in 2003.

The following year she was at a meeting when she met Rita Ngarambe, who was visiting Portland through the humanitarian organization World Vision. Trabosh realized she hadn’t been fully aware of the genocide that had devastated Ngarambe’s country a decade earlier, so she started reading about it.



Victoria Trabosh

In 2005 she organized a fund raiser for the women of Rwanda, then went to Rwanda on a World Vision mission. When Trabosh returned, she and two other local women — Karen Freeland and Bethe McChesney — founded Itafari.



Trabosh speaks at Kigali Parents Primary School in Rwanda (May 2006).

As the foundation president, Trabosh has visited Rwanda 10 times since then, paying for all her own trips. Her itineraries are consumed with speaking, meeting with people and visiting Itafari's programs. She also brings back jewelry, baskets and other handmade goods from Rwanda to sell them here as a way to raise money.

These days, "I am Itafari — I live and breathe it," she says. But she also knows the organization, which saw its funding dry up after the 2008 economic crisis, needs to grow if it is to continue — without her, someday. "That's the challenge to me now; it's not enough for me to speak and go to Rwanda," she says.

"Success is accomplished with more than passion ... but passion won't keep it going if you don't have a better strategy."

A mother's wisdom

And always, the life lessons from Rita Mae Clark Hoering touch everything in her daughter's life. Trabosh tells her mother's story in a memoir that she wrote, "Dead Rita's Wisdom: Simple Words to Help You Live an Extraordinary Life."

Published in 2011, Trabosh's book captures the essence of a woman who herself had a mother who didn't love her, and how she overcame her terrible childhood to raise her own children — Trabosh and her two brothers — with love, dignity and respect.

"I miss my mom every day," Trabosh says. "She was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things."

Learn more

Victoria Trabosh's book:

"Dead Rita's Wisdom: Simple Words to Help You Live an Extraordinary Life" (Wisdom Beneath My Wings Publishing, 2011)

Her websites:

www.victoriatrabosh.com

www.itafari.org