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CalArts forges partnership in Africa;
Valencia campus is helping open a center and library in Rwanda dedicated to
studying the 1994 genocide.

BYLINE: Ann M. Simmons, Times Staff Writer

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Kathy Carbone remembers the twinge of trepidation she felt when she was asked to help create a library in the tiny, east-central African nation of Rwanda.

"Oh my God, what have I just signed up for?" she recently said, recalling her initial reaction. "I felt overwhelmed. I had never created a library."

Carbone, the performing arts librarian at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, realized she faced an enormous task. She would need books, a computerized system to catalog the publications, and a way to get the hard copies to the proposed facility half a world away.

But to her relief, and to the delight of others who initiated the relationship between CalArts and the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Center in Kigali, Rwanda, the effort immediately generated an outpouring of goodwill.

Colleagues, friends and family responded to Carbone's e-mail appeal for books by donating about 150 volumes on genocide, human rights, reconciliation and similar topics. A Texas-based company called Biblionix agreed to provide an online cataloging system -- absolutely free. And when the time came to transport the books, Carbone, her colleagues and students stuffed most of the texts into suitcases and boxes, and headed to Rwanda.

"I was surprised at how many people responded and how quickly," Carbone said of the enthusiasm for the library project, which began about a year ago. "It was beautiful."

The center, which currently operates online, plans to open an office and library in Kigali in July. It would be dedicated to providing information about an ugly subject: The 1994 Rwanda genocide in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed. The library would be a key component of the studies center.

The idea for the center was hatched by Jean-Pierre Karegeye, a Rwandan doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley, and Erik Ehn, dean of the School of Theater at CalArts.

The scholars met while Ehn, a playwright, was visiting Rwanda in 2004. Karegeye said he was excited by Ehn's enthusiasm to explore Rwanda's tragedy and examine ways to promote peace-building through the arts. Karegeye suggested others could also benefit from this experience.

The men resolved to create a center to study the Rwandan genocide, and a special relationship was forged between Rwanda and CalArts.

The center and library are to be housed in the Kigali offices of Ibuka, a genocide survivors organization that has donated the space. Survivors would be able to use the venue to testify about their experiences. Writers and artists would have a place to share and store their work, while scholars could discuss and exchange ideas. The general public would also be welcome, Karegeye said.

"It's open to anyone who wants to know what happened," he added. "The genocide is not something that should just concern Rwandans, but every human being."

For now, the books that Carbone brought to Kigali last year have been cataloged online but are temporarily stored in an office closet. She estimated it would cost at least \$150,000 to pay for new books, office equipment, staff salaries and other resources for the center and library project, which relies entirely on donations.

The librarian spends several hours each week scouring the Internet for free databases on Africa and human rights. She combs journals on genocide and conflict resolution; and posts wish lists for relevant publications with online booksellers.

The information is gradually being loaded onto the website www.igscrwanda.org

Since 2006, CalArts has hosted conferences where scholars, actors, filmmakers and human rights activists were among those who gathered to brainstorm about how to make peace through art, and to watch plays and films.

"The key that opens the door to every conference is Rwanda," Ehn said.

The next four-day conference is scheduled to begin Thursday.

For the last three summers, CalArts students and faculty have traveled to Rwanda. They have heard testimonies from genocide survivors, visited memorial sites and interacted with academics, politicians and other artists.

Students don't get credit for going on the trip and must cover the \$3,500 to \$4,000 cost themselves, unless they qualify for financial assistance from the school.

Virginia Grise raised money to pay for last year's trip in various ways including waiting tables and performing readings from plays she had written.

The second-year master of fine arts candidate had never traveled to Africa and said she had no idea what to expect. But she returned bursting "with a deeper sense of urgency" to her work -- "The urgency to write and tell the stories of our dead," said Grise, 31. "The urgency not to forget."

Catherine Strecker, 27, who is in her final year of the institute's bachelor of fine arts program, was so "blown away" by the experience of visiting Rwanda in 2006 that she went back last year. The resolve of one female survivor had a particular impact on Strecker.

"She asked us to tell people about Rwanda and what happened there in 1994," Strecker recalled. "I realize that I carry her and all of the others with me. In all the work I do, in every breath, they are there."

To Deborah Asimwe, who came from Uganda to study at CalArts last year, the opportunity for American students to learn about genocide in Rwanda seemed exceptional.

"Being on the ground [in Rwanda] is much more important than just reading about it, or what you see on TV," said Asimwe, 34, who is currently producing "Cooking Oil," a play she wrote about the controversy surrounding humanitarian aid distribution in Africa. "It's a place of bearing true witness."

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ann.simmons@latimes.com