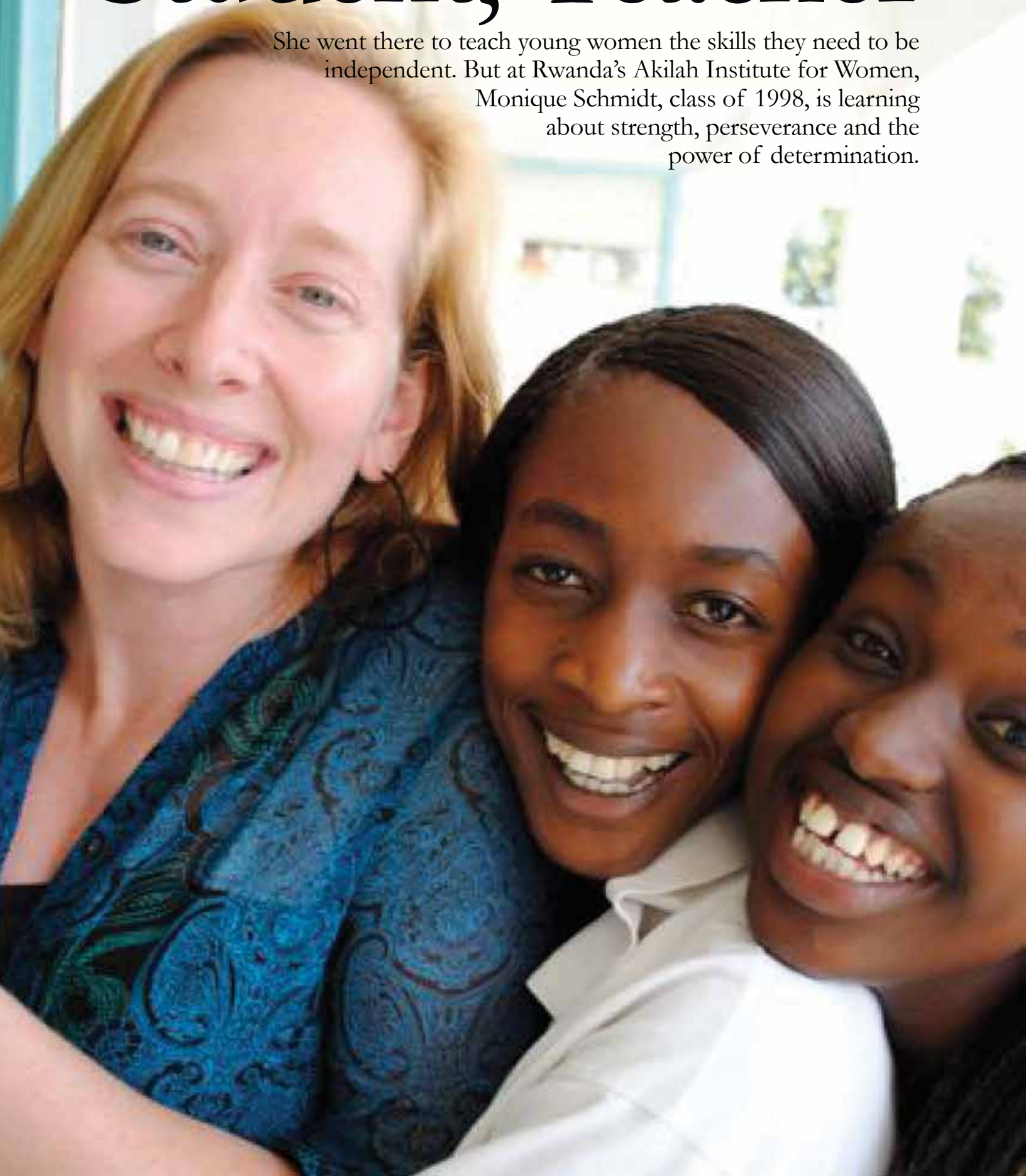


Student, Teacher

She went there to teach young women the skills they need to be independent. But at Rwanda's Akilah Institute for Women, Monique Schmidt, class of 1998, is learning about strength, perseverance and the power of determination.



In some ways, Monique Schmidt's classroom is just like any other. A dusty chalkboard hangs on the wall, papers waiting for grades cover a large wooden desk, a round white clock with black numbers ticks as the minutes of the school day pass by.

From there, the similarities end.

The sea of faces that fill Schmidt's classroom are not those of gum-chewing, sneaker-wearing, Facebook-crazed typical teenagers. Schmidt's students are young women whose brief histories are filled with unimaginable tragedy and sadness – brutal violence, murder and rape.

They have come to the Akilah Institute for Women, the first post-secondary technical training and leadership school of its kind in Kigali, Rwanda, in hopes of building a brighter future – for themselves and for the siblings for whom they care. Orphans of the 1994 Rwandan genocide – a mass massacre of an estimated 800,000 men, women and children – most never got the chance to know their parents. They live in small surrounding villages; some have water and electricity, most do not. Each morning they anxiously ride a rickety bus into Kigali. From the bus stop, they walk a mile and a half to the Akilah Institute, eager to see the woman who inspires and encourages them.

"I often say I have more than 50 kids. These young women have never experienced motherly support or advice. We're focused on academics here, but we're also committed to building confidence and offering support to our students," Schmidt, '98, said. "It's about love and showing them care and concern. That's what makes them grow and thrive. I like working in that environment."

Working for social causes is nothing new for Schmidt, 34. By the time she came to the Akilah Institute in late 2009, she had already served two years in the Peace Corps in Benin, West Africa; worked as a volunteer poetry professor teaching prison inmates in upstate New York; led international community service projects in the West Indies; and conducted women's empowerment workshops at high schools in Togo.

"I believe that the place where you can change the world is in the classroom. In Rwanda, after the genocide, 70 percent of the population was female. Of those, 80 percent now work in agriculture-related jobs for little or no money. At Akilah, we give [young women] scholarships to allow them to work toward diplomas in leadership or hospitality. The tourism industry is flowing money into the Rwandan economy. Our students might start out working in hotels or as tour guides. Yet, eventually, it's our hope that they'll one day start their own hotels



or restaurants. We're preparing them to be leaders in an industry that's open and growing. We're giving women the skills they need to support themselves and their families."

Funded by private donors from the U.S., Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, the Akilah Institute currently serves 120 young women who have finished secondary school but are unable to attend college due to a lack of financial resources. Schmidt says the school plans to double its enrollment next year and eventually hopes to serve a total of 800 students – a lofty goal, but one Schmidt says is reachable because of the drive the students have to succeed.

"It's an interesting population to teach. These girls have been in survival mode for the last 16 years. Yet, they are survivors. We're trying to channel the innovation and creativity they used to survive into skills they can use as leaders. They're ambitious, despite what's happened to them. The tragedies that fill their past hasn't stopped them."

Schmidt, who will talk about her experiences in Rwanda at the Augustana Thought Leader Forum on Friday, April 8, in Sioux Falls, says the students have changed her life.

"The spirit these young women have is amazing. They've seen their parents murdered. As young children, they ran to the Congo, only to see their grandparents killed. Yet, they're so vibrant and strong. It gives me strength. I honestly don't know who's growing more. It's such an affirmation of the goodness of humanity – which sounds odd coming from a land that's been through genocide. The sense of human soul – of the human spirit – is stronger here than anywhere else I've ever been."

AUGUSTANA

Thought Leader Forum

"Reciprocal Transformations:
A Discovery of Soul Through
Service from Augustana to Africa"

11:30 a.m., Friday,
April 8, 2011

CJ Callaway's Event Center

www.augietickets.com

A native of Freeman, S.D., Schmidt credits the foundation she built at Augustana for helping her get to where she is today.

"Augie was where I had my first real service experience – I did a Habitat for Humanity build over spring break. It was the first time I learned service can be rewarding and fun. I still keep in touch with some of my professors – they're all really supportive and encouraging. It doesn't just stop when you graduate."

A past Fulbright fellow with a bachelor's degree from Augustana and a master's degree in fine arts from Syracuse University, Schmidt's future is likely to be filled with endless opportunities. But for now, she's only concentrating on the present.

"I think doing work that's focused on helping others is the most amazing thing someone can do. It really is reciprocal. I get and grow as much as the people I'm supposedly helping. Living from the heart is incredibly exciting and rewarding. It's scary but it's worth it."