

Featuring Dr. Ralph Hazelton

by Erin FAGAN

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“My life can be described like this: I have 300,000 points [air miles] on Air Canada . . . a hundred thousand on British Airways, on African and Asian airlines, and more on American Airlines . . . which I never have time to use.”

Dr. Ralph Hazelton was, however, taking some time from his travels to visit Prince Edward Island, spending a full week around campus. He was the keynote speaker for the CUSO’s 40th anniversary celebrations. Last Thursday, he gave a talk on the diamond trade and its impact on Sierra Leone to a packed audience at the AVC. Friday afternoon, he gave a talk to a fourth-year Anthropology class, one of six courses in which he has been a guest that week. It was then that I caught up with Dr. Hazelton, relaxed on a bench in the local gazebo, enjoying a smoke and telling stories about his life both here and away.

Hazelton was once a professor with the Faculty of Economics at UPEI, teaching development economics from 1973 to 1985. Since then, however, he has been working in countries throughout Africa as well as on the Myanmar-Thailand border, managing volunteer programs and working in refugee camps in some of the most conflicted regions of the world.

“I don’t make any plans for the future...things just sort of evolved,” he says when I ask him how he started his overseas work. He uses two popular films, *Sliding Doors* and *Run Lola Run*, to further explain the idea.

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In 1980, History professor Dr. Andrew Robb invited Hazelton to lunch. A graduate recruiter had visited the campus and was trying to recruit interested students into volunteering overseas. Hazelton asked if there was anything for him.

“As a matter of fact, there was,” he says. “Within a day, I had made a decision to go.” Over his two year absence, Hazelton taught at a polytechnic institute in Lesotho, Africa. When he came back to UPEI, he discovered that, like many others with the similar experience, “I left my heart and mind in Africa.”

“It was a heavy decision [to return to Lesotho],” he recalls, “I had a career and tenure . . . but in 1985 I had made up my mind, resigned, threw away my tenure.”

“I just never stopped. It’s been a mind-blower for me,” Hazelton laughs.

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He spent six years in Lesotho as the country director, where he managed programs for an organization that had placed 30 Canadian volunteers in the South African country. There was also an exchange of professors between the two countries in which he was involved.

“What I was most interested in was working with refugees,” he adds,

underlining this as the theme of most of his work abroad.

“This was the time of the growing hype on the Apartheid issue. . .there were thousands of refugees flowing over the border.” In Botswana, he began interviewing refugees for the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) program.

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“It was a dangerous time . . . there would be attacks on houses where they thought that refugees lived. . .some of my friends were killed.”

Dr. Hazelton recalls one incident, in particular, in which 25 people were having a pre-Christmas party in 1985, when armed forces entered and fired upon everyone with machine guns.

He also worked for CARE, which took him to Zambia, where he worked on traditional development projects, such as digging wells and improving sanitation services. He also worked in refugee camps for a “constant string” of 25,000 Angolans. In Kenya, he was once again the director of a development program, but of course he was also heavily involved in three refugee camps for Somalis.

By 1994, he was working full time with refugees as what he calls an “emergency cowboy”: he would be placed on planes and sent to locations according to the needs of new refugee situations. This placed him for a time in Goma, Zaire, at the time of the crisis in Rwanda. In that country, one million people were killed, and three million people became refugees.

“There were one million in a three day period at one border post,”

Dr. Hazelton describes. “A friend from Halifax said he had never seen so many goddamn people in one place in his life.” Unfortunately, there was also a cholera outbreak at Goma, which resulted in counts of 5,000 bodies a day.

In 1995, Dr. Hazelton had a heart attack and was returned to Canada for emergency surgery. Eight weeks later he was back in Liberia in the middle of a civil war.

He has also worked at the border region of Burma and Thailand, which was a completely different cultural environment from Africa and also involved fewer refugees.

In the last few years, his work evolved into research on the relationships between conflicts and resources. He and colleagues published a 90 page report entitled, *At The Heart of the Matter: Diamonds and Human Security in Sierra Leone*. This report set off a large international campaign by Amnesty International in the U.S. to picket jewellery stores this past Valentine’s Day in New York (as a side note, all three diamond companies in Sierra Leone are Canadian registered). As a result, the team has been granted funding for a four-year period and six separate studies, as well as one on the conflict in Sudan and its relationship to oil.

“The biggest thing that has astonished me,” Hazelton adds, “is the inhumanity of man to man.” He has noted grimly that, characteristically, 90% of those killed are civilians, and the majority of these women and children.

“Civilians are targeted as a strategy. It is also disheartening to have witnessed a rise in child soldiers.” He related a story of being held up at a checkpoint in Sierra Leone, with a muzzle in his face, by a drugged 11-year-old boy.