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## Cassidy: Shrinking the world with startups

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**Cassidy: Town hall protesters are drowning out legitimate debate**  
**Cassidy: Little things can spark a kid's passion**  
**Cassidy: Looking at the Valley through fresh eyes**  
**Cassidy: Tech's new love**  
**Cassidy: What did people do before Twitter? Walk around stupid?**  
**Cassidy: Layoff provides opportunity to make a difference**  
**Cassidy: Vacation provides perspective on economic insecurity**  
**Cassidy: Health care reform veering off track?**

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By Mike Cassidy  
Mercury News Columnist  
Posted: 08/27/2009 02:30:23 PM PDT  
Updated: 08/27/2009 02:44:25 PM PDT

Joy Kabera believes the darkest days for Rwanda are over.

The horrific genocide of the early 1990s is past and she is among a growing number of women entrepreneurs with plans to prosper in a land that has become a better place.

"So many people died. So many families lost their people," Kabera says, remembering the ethnic warring that killed hundreds of thousands dead, including a number of Kabera's relatives. "But after the genocide, everything was corrected. It's a peaceful country now."

A peaceful country in which Kabera and her husband had launched a number of businesses, including an outdoor advertising firm, a radio station and a beer distributorship, before she set out to start up her own Promota Creations, a company that sells promotional items for corporate marketing campaigns.

None of which is to say that Kabera, 40, can't use a little help. What fledgling business owner couldn't? Which explains how Kabera found herself last week in the Sunnyvale offices of Akraya, a staffing firm run by Sonu Ratra, who immigrated from India in 1996.

It was a long way from Kabera's own office at Promota in Kigali and from her home, where she lives with her husband and four kids.

But Silicon Valley has always been about making the world smaller. And Ratra, who co-founded Akraya with her husband in 2001, has always been about helping women in business.

So when she heard last spring about Peace through Business, an

international effort to pair women business owners from two of the most war-torn countries on the planet, Rwanda and Afghanistan, with successful female entrepreneurs in the United States, she was on board.

The program, which grew out of an initiative launched by the administrations of George W. Bush and Afghani president Hamid Karzai, starts with an eight-week, mini-MBA course in the business women's home countries. It culminates with three weeks in the United States, including five days during which the women live with, and shadow, a U.S. business woman.

Ratra says she can relate to the difficulties of running a business in a country that itself is struggling.

"I came from India," she says. "When I was growing up, it was a developing country. It wasn't easy."

It isn't easy in Afghanistan, which has been wracked by war for years, or in Rwanda, an agricultural economy where most live in poverty.

In all, 29 women traveled to the United States, and after additional classes, fanned out to Illinois, New York, New Mexico, Texas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Louisiana and elsewhere. All of them no doubt benefited from their time with their host entrepreneurs. Still, it's hard to imagine a better classroom than Silicon Valley.

"I think the valley is really the model for entrepreneurship, and starting a small business and growing it to a mega-business," says Terry Neese, founder of the Oklahoma-based Institute

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Sonu Ratra, left, discusses a Facebook page developed for Joy... (Jim Gensheimer, Mercury News)

1 2 3 >

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for Economic Empowerment of Women, which runs Peace through Business. "Look at what the valley has done in terms of that type of entrepreneurial growth."

Kabera's company is only a year old, but she has big plans.

She's hired 22 employees. Promota has started producing some of its products in its own factory, rather than outsourcing the work. She would like to expand her market beyond Rwanda to surrounding African nations, but she is having a hard time finding skilled workers at affordable wages. And she needs to better get the word out about her own enterprise.

Ratra took Kabera to three local companies that are in the corporate tchotchke space. Kabera says her hosts offered encouragement, saying that they too faced similar challenges early on. Executives at Logomark in San Jose provided Kabera with manufacturing contacts in China. She's already been in touch.

The pair visited Google to hear about the company's technology initiative in Rwanda. And Ratra introduced Kabera to marketing executives at [Walmart.com](http://Walmart.com), Safeway and Chevron, who talked to her about the importance of corporate branding — a message she can take to clients in Rwanda who might benefit from her goods.

But beyond the specific tips, Silicon Valley offers some lessons that apply to businesses in all sectors. There's the importance of speed, adaptation, innovation and risk-taking, for instance. And, of course, there is the value of networking.

"What I learned from this side," Kabera says, "is the way business people are cooperative with each other. In my country it is very rare to find business people having good relationships, sharing information."

Kabera says she and the 15 other Rwanda women who participated in the summer program intend to change that. They plan to form a business association — an association with the goal of teaching what they've learned to other women in their country.

"I think that will be really helpful," she says, "to our communities, our families and the nation."

And just like that, the world shrinks a little more.

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