

Running to Save a Life and Change Lives

Gilbert Tuhabonye loves to run. Growing up in Burundi, he ran the African plains near his village every day, challenged often by other distance runners who wanted a race. "They would see dust," he says, "because I would run like the wind."

Now 36, Tuhabonye never dreamed his youthful passion for running would one day save his life or become his gift of life to people a continent away.

Of the Tutsi tribe, Tuhabonye was a middle-schooler when civil war ignited in his country between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. One afternoon, Hutus came to his school.

"They put every Tutsi they could find inside the building and put the building on fire, and they watched everybody die," he says. The fire burned for eight terrifying hours before Tuhabonye got out. "I kept hearing a voice telling me that I would be OK," he recalls. "After nine hours I ran."

Though seriously injured, Tuhabonye outran his pursuers. "It was God who gave me the strength to get away from those people," he says. During his long recovery in a hospital, he became a Christian. Today Tuhabonye lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and two daughters, where he trains as many as 300 runners a week who call themselves 'Gilbert's Gazelles.'

He hasn't forgotten Burundi, where he started a foundation for poor children, and he does a similar work in Austin. As for himself, his eyes are on the road ahead: "Running has helped me to forget and forgive the people who tried to kill me. I always give thanks to God ... who gave me the speed I have."