By Summer Downs, 2018-19 QF Social Enterprise Fellow

My story begins five years ago when I spent a summer in Rwanda working with survivors of the 1994 genocide. In many ways, the summer I spent there summed up the major themes that I still carry with me, in terms of my career and personal development: I worked with an organization that was led by Rwandese folk and utilized curriculum and tactics that were locally derived, I stood as a witness to the people who had been through unimaginable trauma, I worked in a camp with Congolese refugees, and I supported initiatives such as a social enterprise basket-weaving and sewing program that empowered people to provide for themselves. In the five years since, I have worked in Greece with migrant sex workers, spent a summer in northern Iraq working with a medical and humanitarian organization, led an international training program on human trafficking, taught sexual assault prevention workshops to kids in Ghana, participated in a program that provides resources and vocational training to sex workers in the red light districts of Thailand, helped resettle refugees in Seattle, shaved my head to raise money for Syrian refugees, and did crisis intervention work with formerly abused children here in Denver. Throughout the past five years, my career has been focused on learning how to empower communities and individuals that have been through devastating traumas (such as sexual violence and conflict), as well as how to deconstruct my own privilege and understand the fundamental importance of race, gender, class and other intersectional identities in development work. I have become passionate about decolonization and radical political and economic justice, as well as incredibly critical of almost everything I learn and am involved with. The brokenness of the systems that we are all embedded in sometimes threatens to cripple my resolve.

But this summer I finally found myself back in the Great Lakes region, just a few hundred miles away from where I had been five summers ago. I was in eastern Congo, a region that I have been drawn to because of the incredible richness of Congolese culture and people, as well as the violence that has been perpetrated against the Congolese by those with structural power. In some ways, I am a completely different person now than I was back then; and in many ways I feel that the more I learn, the more education I get, and the more I travel, the less I know. One of the only things I feel certain about is that the world is fundamentally unequal and unjust, and the issues we are trying to solve are irreducibly complex.

But one of the only other things that has been constant throughout this journey is the fundamental importance of people, relationships, and solidarity. Everywhere I have gone, I have met local people fighting for their communities and simply fighting for the right to be with the ones they love, to live comfortably and free of violence, and to thrive in their potential as human beings. The people I worked with in Congo are the community’s greatest asset and have become so important to me. My artifact for this retreat is me, because this body is the only thing I have had through this journey and that I will carry with me until I die. I’ve recorded some of the lessons I’ve learned on my life journey on my body as a kind of living art piece, and I will highlight one of my tattoos as my artifact for today. This tattoo on my wrist is the Zulu word ubuntu, a pan-African concept that means “I am because we are”. It speaks to the fundamental importance of relationships for our very identity as human beings – we cannot be human
without each other, and we cannot be liberated without each other. That’s why, even though I don’t have much hope any more, I keep fighting – because you never stop fighting for your own. And that is the only way that I still derive hope – from the incredible people I’ve met, the normal, ordinary, amazing people I’ve met who deserve the same rights and access to resources and happiness that we have. So I don’t think social enterprise is some kind of magic bullet solution, because I don’t even know if there are solutions to the complex problems we want to solve; but if it can be used as one tool in a system of collaboration, compassion, and solidarity, to provide a way to redistribute resources and empower communities and people to reach their own potential, this is what I am fighting for. I am committed to loving the people in my two communities – Denver and the Congo – through radical justice and empowerment.

*Fellows were asked to bring an artifact of their life journey to share at their retreat in September 2018.*