

**July-August 2025**



# **UT Community Leaders RWANDA**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**TENNESSEE**  
KNOXVILLE

# COHORT



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International Affairs



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Assistant Professor of Evaluation, Statistics, & Research Methodology,  
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**Community Leaders**

Jim and Phyllis Nichols  
Harold and Carmen Hicks  
Joyce Green Cotner  
Dr. Shanika Small



**July 26**

**July 27**

**July 28**

**July 29**

# TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

## Agencies and Orgnaizations

U.S. Embassy to Rwanda  
Rwanda Development Board  
University of Rwanda  
Rwanda Ministry of Education  
Kigali Innovation City  
Bridge2Rwanda  
Rwanda Men's Resource Center (RWAMREC)  
Resonate  
Koperative Koabiga (Horitculture Co-Op)  
Rwanda Clothing  
Kate Spade: On Purpose  
Kigali Genocide Memorial  
Shooting Touch

## Individuals

Eric Kneedler  
*U.S. Ambassador to Rwanda*

Jean-Guy Afrika  
*CEO, Rwanda Development Board*

Kayihura Muganga Didas  
*Vice Chancellor, University of Rwanda*

Claudette Irere  
*Minister of State for Education*

Craig Clulow  
*CEO, Kigali Innovation City*

Didier Gakuba  
*Manager, Koperative Koabiga*

Benon Mugisha  
*Head of Operations & Support  
Bridge2Rwanda*

Fidele Rutayisire  
*Founder and Executive Director  
RWAMREC*

Claudine Umulisa  
*COO & Acting Manger, Abahizi Rwanda  
Kate Spade: On Purpose supplier*

Serge Rwigamba  
*Head Guide, Kigali Genocide Memorial*

Sandrine Uwase  
*Partnerships Manager, Resonate*



July 30

July 31

August 1

August 2

# VISIT OBJECTIVES

The UT Community Leaders Program connects Knoxville to the world. Engaged leaders in the community get to see first-hand how global engagement transforms communities and careers. Immersive, in-country experiences not only spark fresh ideas and skills for our co-hort but also model the powerful impact such opportunities have on University of Tennessee students—expanding their horizons, preparing them for a global workforce and shaping them into future innovators. By investing in bold international partnerships, UT is helping Tennessee think beyond borders and create lasting opportunities that reach far beyond the classroom.

*“Working with countries like Rwanda is mutually beneficial. ... The reciprocity for the university is how to better educate all people who come to (UT).”*

*-Phyllis Nichols  
Retired President & CEO,  
Knoxville Urban League*

## IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

### Center of Excellence for Transportation

A World Bank grant-funded, collaborative initiative between the University of Rwanda and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Center for Transportation Research. This collaboration supports Rwanda’s national priorities around infrastructure and mobility while laying the groundwork for broader academic research and professional engagements.

**Immediate Goal:** Establish a physical presence for UT in Rwanda to support partnership.

### Social Work Partnership

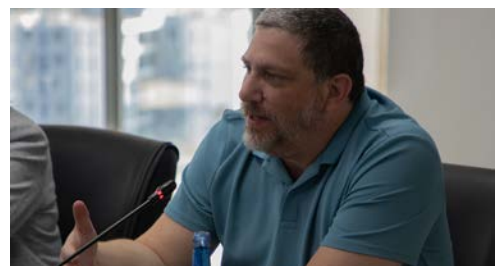
Initiating a formal collaboration between the UT College of Social Work and Rwanda Men’s Resource Center (RWAMREC) to explore internship and field placement opportunities for UT students.

**Immediate Goal:** Coordinate visit from RWAMREC CEO to UT Knoxville campus.

### Tourism and Hospitality

Tourism and hospitality account for roughly 20% of Rwanda’s annual GDP, making the sector a major driver of growth. By collaborating with Rwanda’s hospitality and tourism industry, UT can strengthen its position as a leader in international hospitality education. This partnership could create opportunities for faculty in applied research, international grants, and philanthropic funding; provide students with real-world experiences that enhance employability; and establish a strong pipeline of highly motivated students from Rwanda and across Africa into UT’s hospitality and tourism management programs, both online and on campus.

**Immediate Goal:** Explore research, education, and study abroad partnerships.



# WHY RWANDA, WHY NOW?

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT), has a unique and timely opportunity to establish a transformational footprint in Rwanda—Africa’s innovation hub and a regional leader in education reform, entrepreneurship, and public-private partnerships. UT’s visits across Kigali and meetings with ministries, institutions, and innovation centers revealed a powerful convergence of readiness, need, and mutual benefit.

- **Youthful Demographics:** More than 70% of the population is under the age of 30, presenting a massive market for undergraduate, graduate, and certificate-level education programs.
- **Growing Higher Education Sector:** Rwanda has 37 universities serving 120,000 students, yet only 10% of eligible youth are enrolled, highlighting a substantial unmet demand for quality education.
- **Government Commitment:** Rwanda’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education Council are actively inviting international partnerships to fast-track degree offerings, reform accreditation, and build faculty capacity.
- **Innovation and Hospitality Hubs:** Kigali Innovation City and hotel sector partners provide infrastructure for industry-aligned degree pathways, internship pipelines, and on-the-ground UT presence.
- **Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) Precedent:** CMU Africa’s success with more than \$100,000 per year in MS programs and strong governmental support illustrates Rwanda’s value as a launchpad for U.S. universities in Africa.

## STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

### Higher Education and Workforce Integration

**Accreditation Pathways:** Rwanda is ready to fast-track UT degrees aligned to market needs such as transport innovation, agriculture, and teacher education.

**Internship Mandates:** Rwanda has mandatory internships for all degree graduates, offering UT a unique advantage in combining education with employability.

### Innovation and Industry Partnerships

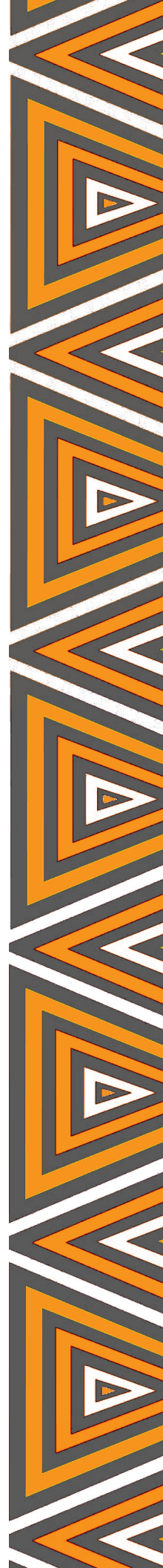
**Kigali Innovation City (KIC):** Hosts global universities and co-working spaces. KIC offers 20-year lease options, MOU-backed partnerships, and housing capacity for 4,500 students.

## REFLECTIONS

The UT delegation departed Rwanda with a profound sense of alignment, inspiration, and possibility. Their experiences went far beyond institutional reconnaissance — and they connected deeply with Rwanda’s vision, values, and people.

### What They Felt

- Empowered by Rwanda’s bold, clear vision and agile execution.
- Inspired from witnessing resilience, innovation, and deep national pride.
- Grounded in shared struggles and aspirations between Rwanda and the U.S.
- Motivated to serve, partner, and build lasting bridges.



*"I saw opportunities that were endless there for future engineers in the college at the University of Tennessee. ... Engineers solve problems and they solve problems all over the world"*

*-Dr. Jeremy Kirk*

*Assistant Dean for Access and Engagement  
Tickle College of Engineering*



*"There are a lot of opportunities for the University of Tennessee in Rwanda. Not just in terms of research, but in development and trade."*

*-Dr. Fatima Zahra*

*Assistant Professor of Evaluation,  
Statistics, & Research Methodology,*