**Student Academy Award goes to SOC alumna**

BY MIKE UNGER

A central question looms throughout Laura Waters Hinson's stirring first feature documentary, "Can I Forgive?"

"Can I Forgive?" She hopes audiences will consider the question in the context of their own lives when watching As We Forgive. The film chronicles national reconciliation in Rwanda through the eyes of two women who come face-to-face with the murderers who mass-murdered "jeot familaires," during the 1994 genocide. It's an examination of the human capacity to forgive, and while its content raises many philosophical questions, the film's overall power is definitive.

In June, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded the film a gold medal during its 33th annual Student Academy Awards competition. Hinson '07 won $5,000 and more importantly, expanded exposure for her documentary. "I think it was one of the most incredible experiences of my life," the 29-year-old filmmaker said of her project and the recognition it received. "Starting a conversation about radical forgiveness and reconciliation is something I really believe in."

Born and raised in Destin, Fla., Hinson earned a bachelor's degree from Furman University in South Carolina and launched an ultimately unfulfilling career in health-care marketing. Then, after a broken engagement in 2002, she decided to change her destiny.

After thinking about what she loved in life, she realized that she wanted to mix "journalism, photography, story-telling, and something that would change the way people thought about things. Documentary seemed to be the marriage of all these goals," so she headed to AU's School of Communication.

In 2005, Hinson traveled to Rwanda with her church to establish a partnership with an orphanage. There, a bishop told her of the government's plan to release tens of thousands of prisoners jailed in the wake of the genocide.

"I thought that was pretty remarkable," she says. "I came back home to D.C.; I needed a the- re, so it is what I used to do. I learned to be a film student, and it was going to be a life commitment."

Working within the constraints of a $25,000 budget and a four-week shooting schedule, Hinson and a crew of four set out to capture the raw humanity of a country torn apart by atrocities.

"It was certainly a challenging subject matter," she says. "Meeting with survivors and perpetrators of the genocide, and asking them how they could reconcile with each other. I think it's a divining thing for reconciliation of this magnitude to happen. It deepened my faith and challenged me in huge ways."

The shoot went relatively smoothly, and Hinson even got to interview Rwandan president Paul Kagame. The most daring part of the project occurred when she returned to the United States.

"Editing a film in a different language is a tough process," she says. "I couldn't reshoot anything. I was totally locked into the 55 hours I shot in that one month. I really had to get creative in filling in things where I needed B-roll." Once the film was completed, Hinson showed it to religious, political, and interest groups around Washington.

"I liked the mistake because it gave a positive example for reconciliation," said Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.). In fact, Wolf was so moved by a screening in February that he put Hinson in touch with actress and human rights activist Mia Farrow, who agreed to narrate it.

"It's a tough subject, and it's something people don't know what to do with, Hinson says. "Having Mia definitely opened some doors."

As has the Student Academy Awards. "Laura's achievement confirms what I have always known, that SOC has a superior documentary film program featuring some of this country's most talented young filmmakers," says SOC dean Larry Kirkman. "Hollywood Reporter" agrees, praising our "strong, socially active documentary studies" in an article naming SOC one of America's top film schools.

Hinson now is taking the film on a screening tour of colleges and churches around the country. She hopes to bring it to Rwanda in the coming months.

"I think this is a story that goes beyond genocide," she says. "It's about the power of reconciliation, and what that can do in our own lives."

For more information, log on to www.asweforgivethose.com.

**Upcoming strategic plan forum called to gather campus input**

BY SALLY ACHARYA

The discussion is starting on the big ideas that will power AU as it heads into the future.

The mission of the university will be on the agenda at a town hall forum on July 28, as writing on the draft strategic plan begins.

The strategic plan that will shape the school in the next decade will be drafted in August. It will rely strongly on feedback from the academic and community, with the July 28 forum on mission, goals, and themes as a key part of the process.

"The work is at an exciting and critical stage," said AU president Neil Kerwin in the six-month progress report of the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, which was released last week.

The committee is also seeking feedback by Aug. 1 for its analysis of the campus environment, which was released with the progress report and will form the foundational assumptions of the plan. It is based on feedback gathered over the past six months as more than 1,100 members of the community joined in the process and shared insights into AU's greatest strengths and challenges.

Input from the campus community has been a hallmark of the strategic planning process, which has been in high gear since February with the first meeting of the 18-member committee. The spring semester was busy with online chats, departmental meetings, retreats, town hall meetings, and more than 30 meet-ings with AU constituencies.

Avenues of communication have been plentiful, with comments arriving through suggestion boxes, surveys, and the committee's blog as well as meetings where faculty, staff, students, and alumni gathered to discuss the planing process, goals for the future, and characteristics that define AU. The process has generated more than 140 pages of comments and ideas.

AU's greatest strengths, according to members of the campus community, are grounded in its core values of social responsibility and a commitment to cultural and intellectual diversity.

What stands out most about AU, they say, is its global reach, its high expectations of quality, the strong links between students and practice, and such appealing traits as its lush green campus and its location in the nation's capital.

On the other hand, the report said, "successful institutional recognition and address their weaknesses," which in AU's case include "the lack of a strong and consistent brand identity and institutional confidence." Challenges for the future include increased competition for talented students and faculty.

There's more opportunity for feedback to come as the strategic planning process moves into its next phase. AU's future continues, Kerwin says, "The quality of the vision and goals that follow depends on your active participation."

**New director takes SPA Leadership Program**

BY SALLY ACHARYA

It was her students who urged Margaret Marr to apply for the director's position of the Leadership Program at the School of Public Affairs (SPA).

A year ago, she knew nothing about the program. Marr was a new professor at AU, who joined SPA's Department of Justice, Law and Society after teaching legal studies at the University of California--Santa Cruz.

But almost immediately, she noticed that some of her most committed students were part of the program, in which they hone their skills as leaders through four years of coursework and real-world projects.

"It ultimately really is the students [who drew me to it]. They are dedicated, hardworking, bright students who are really committed to making the world a better place," says Marr, a lawyer who continues to practice constitutional law and a social activist for causes ranging from civil rights to environmental protection to educational reform.

Each year, a cohort of 35 fresh-men is admitted to the leadership program, about a third of the applicants. During their first year, they work as teams on projects around issues such as health and social justice. The class of 2011, for instance, planned and implemented a range of projects:

- a series of events to raise awareness about Darfur, from a "refugee camp" and die-in on the quad to a panel with ambassadors and experts broadcast on C-Span
- a mentoring program at nearby Janney Elementary School
- a health fair on the quad
- an effort to create a greener environment at Macfarland Middle School in northeast Washington, D.C., creating mini-lessons and working to reduce the school's carbon footprint

Throughout their AU careers, students take courses on leadership skills, do internships, serve as teaching assistants for incoming students, and practice fund raising. In the past, the students have raised funds for charitable organizations. That's one of the changes Marr is planning.

She's working on revamping the second year curriculum to allow students to build on their social activism, so instead of doing fund raising for others, they'll design another social activism project and engage in fund raising for it. The projects could be imple-mented over a single year, or be developed over the course of their time at AU.

"AU students are generally outstanding, and the students in this program are remarkable in their achievement," Marr says. "I want them to look at the world and not only see problems, but see that they can be solutions, and put their hard work and their leadership to work in solving those problems."