

Letter from The Rwanda School Project – May, 2009

The snacks were laid out, the rooms were swept, the student papers were ready in the folders and I was both nervous and excited about our first parents' Visitation Day at Rwamagana Lutheran School's English Enrichment Program. One of our students appeared at the door twenty minutes before it was time to start and I stepped out the door to greet him.

But I was startled when I realized that there was another person present outside the door at my knees – a man in his thirties on his hands and knees, extending a hand out of the sandal he'd used to crawl on the ground in order to shake my hand. Having badly deformed feet, this was his way of getting around.

Later, seated next to Philippe and looking very ordinary, Mr. Mugabo explained that Philippe's parents could no longer care for him and, as a next-door neighbor, he had volunteered to be Philippe's guardian. "Because I can't earn a lot of extra money, Philippe cuts hair at the barbershop in order to earn bus fare to school," he explained. "But that's why he sometimes doesn't come to school – he can't always get a customer. Yet I thank God that this school has accepted him because I think it was his last chance. Seventeen is a bit old for starting secondary school but he really wants to learn. It was sad...before when he was in primary, he often missed school, so he is behind some of the others."

I can't tell you how touched I was that this man had come on hands and knees to climb on the crowded mini-van and then make his way down the gravel and mud drive to our building to support Philippe's education with his presence.

One mother told us that her daughter was traumatized in 1994 when she was only six months old. Beaten and left for dead by militiamen, she still fears loud noises and commotion. "Please be patient with her if she doesn't want to speak," her mother said. "That's why I want her at this school where she can get attention. In the other school there is so much overcrowding and she was afraid." Knowing this, we've been pleased to see her raising her hand to write answers on the board and to see her smiling more often.

Half of our students this year are former street boys from the AEE School of Champions, the agency from which we are renting classrooms. Some are orphans, others ran away from abuse and others moved out because of scarce resources at home. One of them recently performed a rap song in Kinyarwanda for the staff telling about his life on the streets and his wish that all street boys can get education.

Clemence lost both of her parents in the war and now lives with her elderly grandmother. "We hope that she can stay in school," said the pastor. "We don't want her to make bad choices in her teen years."

The genocide may be over, but its effects linger on in ways that directly affect our students. I realize more than ever that they need a safe school community, strong problem-solving skills and academic abilities to prepare them for a rapidly changing country that wants to avoid the crushing combination of poverty, overpopulation and

ethnic division. Fortunately, Rwanda's government is strongly supportive of education and it is making strong efforts to increase access for girls and rural children.

We are also very blessed to have caring and committed teachers, wonderful advice and support from several Expeditionary Learning staff in the USA, and good books donated by many generous friends. We are now getting ready to clear the land for construction and we're making plans for a summer day camp.

Meanwhile, the English Enrichment program continues, and the students, all between ages 13 and 20, study English and Math every day and Science and Social Studies twice a week, supplemented with art, sports and music. Factorization and prime numbers alternate with lessons about Rosa Parks and the human digestive system and we've tried Ultimate Frisbee, jump roping, trust games and singing. Gradually, they are using more English without prompting. It's a tall order for them to be ready for Secondary One next year but some of them are really motivated to try. Every morning, I am moved when we conclude our morning circle with a prayer (open to any religion) and students give thanks for the chance to study. In the words of one former street boy, "I am starting my new life!"



Our Needs Right Now:

We're ready (yes, at last!) to build! We need \$250,000 to construct our first ten classrooms and we are already three fourths of the way there. Thanks to your generous help, we already have desks, tables, chairs, books, office supplies and equipment. We are renting rooms and must start our construction in order to be fully certifiable by the Ministry of Education. If you'd like to talk to us about a naming donation, (donate a classroom and have your name or someone you'd like to honor named by the doorway), please let us know.

We are in need of a BELL for ringing between classes and at the end of break...might you have one in an attic or on a shelf somewhere?

Are you a Double Dutch expert? A choral expert? We'd like to talk to you!

A big THANK YOU to everyone who has helped us get this far.

Robin Strickler, Director
The Rwanda School Project

