

*"My time here has already given me memories, relationships, and lessons I know I'll carry with me for years to come."*

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# THE RWANDA SCHOOL PROJECT

LEARN.EMPOWER.LEAD.

## RLS Graduate Mellisa Kabanyana Makes Her Way in China

From Kibungo, in Eastern Province of Rwanda, to Hangzhou, about 200 km from Shanghai, in China, it's a long journey, but it's one that Mellisa Muvunyi was excited to try. Graduating from RLS in 2021, the world was still somewhat on hold because of COVID-19. Mellisa had already competed with 500 other Rwandan graduates, written an application and attended an interview to be chosen as one of 20 Rwandans to study in Hangzhou, but she had to wait to get her visa because of COVID restrictions.

That hadn't stopped her from getting an online tutor in Chinese and she was already studying Chinese characters while she was still in Rwanda. That's typical of Mellisa, who has always had lots of energy and enthusiasm. At RLS, she was a talent show regular, singing, dancing and playing guitar. At school events, she was never nervous to stand up in front of others and give a presentation or speech.

Now, you can see her online, speaking for Chinese-Rwandan investment opportunities or learning how to do marketing for online buyers. **'One second, 1.5 tons sold: China's coffee miracle for Rwanda' on Youtube.**

Already able to speak Kinyarwanda, English and some Swahili, Mellisa is adding Mandarin Chinese to her communications skills and she hopes to return to Rwanda and start her own business while helping others to also learn how to use online marketing skills.

This last summer, she was thrilled to host her parents in Hangzhou, and it was her mother's first airplane journey. Mellisa



**SCAN THIS CODE TO VIEW THE VIDEO**

handles food ordering and train and bus transportation in the city with ease and enjoyed hosting her parents. At the same time, she's also been enthusiastic to share Rwandan culture with people in China, making her a real cultural ambassador and leader.

Mellisa says, "I have served as the head student leader for the Rwandan cohort of 2026 [at my university] and I also lead the Rwandan community in my city, Hangzhou.

These leadership traits didn't just appear; they were planted and nurtured at RLS. The school taught me to lead others, but more importantly, to lead myself.

"RLS is more than a school; it is a family. It taught me how to face society with courage and integrity. It prepared me academically, morally and socially for life abroad. The values I learned at RLS continue to guide me every day."

# We Celebrate Karl Smith's Leadership and Welcome Debbi Holmerud



What a joy it is to be writing to you as the new president of the Rwanda School Project (RSP). I must admit, however, I also feel a sense of trepidation as I think about stepping into the shoes filled so capably by Karl Smith for 12 years. Karl set a stellar example for how to approach this important work, so at my first meeting as president, the Board and I took time to recognize the heart, energy and dedication Karl poured into RSP. We did this in four different ways.

First, we presented Karl with a walking stick, hand carved by Bishop Emeritus Murray Finck of the Pacifica Synod, ELCA from a piece of African mahogany, with a grip wrapped with cord in the colors of the Rwandan flag, a sunburst embedded in its top, and a leather strap added for strength. A walking stick is often used by those who are on a journey, sometimes trekking through unknown or uncharted territory on their way to new heights. We think it is a fitting metaphor to honor Karl for the years he spent leading the RSP through the work of establishing a new secondary school in a town in Rwanda's Eastern Province. What began as a class of 24 students with founder Robin Strickler and three teachers has grown into a boarding and day school of 317 students, 24 teachers, a staff of 19 and a visionary school director during Karl's tenure.

The second part of our recognition was a Word Cloud formed from words that describe Karl and his work with RSP. The most frequently offered words were Dedicated, Visionary, Faithful and Devoted. These words capture Karl's approach to the work of supporting the development of Rwamagana Leaders' School.

Third, as you know, we completed the construction of a beautiful library on our campus in 2021. It is the heart of the campus, filled with light, comfortable places for students to gather and is an inspiring place of welcome and learning. The Board has taken action to name the library the "KJS Library" to honor Karl for years to come.

Finally, we adopted a commitment to giving our donors an opportunity to make a special one-time donation in honor of Karl's retirement as President of the Rwanda School Project. It is Karl's hope for us to use these donations to establish a perpetual student sponsorship fund that will ensure a student who is ready, able and determined to attend school at RLS will be able to do so, regardless of his/her ability to pay tuition. If you feel led to make a one-time contribution to this fund, you can do so by going to [rwandaschoolproject.org](http://rwandaschoolproject.org) and clicking on the orange Donate button at the top of the page. From there, click on "Sponsorship" and scroll down to the box titled "In Honor of". Write in "Karl Smith", and your

donation will be added to a fund that will only be used for this purpose. You may also send your donation to Rwanda School Project, 1300 St. Francis Road, Santa Rosa, CA, 95409. Please write "Karl Smith" in the memo line, so your donation is applied correctly.

And just a bit about myself...I retired in June 2014 after serving as a public school teacher and administrator for 36 years. 6 months later, I visited our school in Rwamagana for the first time. I was moved to tears as I met curious and focused students, observed quality teaching, listened to well-prepared student presentations, and learned of the challenges that came from doing it all without electricity, running water and computers. So much has changed since my first visit. Now, I find myself moved to tears as I listen to School Director Moses tell us about the college/university fair our school hosts for more than 1,500 students from the area, the graduation ceremony, talent show, parents' visitation days, student accomplishments on the national exams and their successes in regional robotics tournaments. Learning about the addition of solar-powered lighting, a computer lab, internet access, and entrepreneurial programs that bring in proceeds from selling bread made in our bread oven, milk from our cows and eggs from the chickens, both tended by students, inspire a sense of awe in me as I reflect on how much our school has evolved.

Our work is now focused on enhancing the foundation that has brought us to this point and expanding it to achieve our dream of the Big Vision...to double the number of students whose lives we impact, and to be a school of recognized excellence in Rwanda. I join my fellow board members by taking on this work with joy!

*Debbi Holmerud*



## PRINCETON IN AFRICA FELLOW PUTS HER JOURNALISM SKILLS TO USE AT RLS

**This year, we're very lucky to have *two* Princeton in Africa (PiAf) Fellows with us at Rwamagana Leaders' School. This month, Davina Thompson introduces us to her work.**

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Hello and Mwaramutse from Rwamagana, Rwanda! My name is Davina Thompson, and I'm one of the 2025–2026 Princeton in Africa Fellows serving at Rwamagana Leaders School (RLS). I graduated from Princeton University this past May with a degree in Public and International Affairs, along with minors in Journalism and African Studies.

This fellowship is my first professional step after college, and it has already reshaped how I think about learning, leadership, and community. Working with RLS seniors on their college applications and personal statements has been the most meaningful part of my experience so far. Getting to know their aspirations has been deeply inspiring. In the photo below are a few of the students I support this semester. Cham, the tallest among us, dreams of becoming a cybersecurity expert. Cherine and Sylvie hope to pursue careers in healthcare so they can serve their communities as doctors. Working with students like them has shown me just how powerful it is to equip young people with the tools, guidance, and confidence to dream big and lead.

Beyond college counseling, my co-fellow and I have been developing a creative reading and writing program for the entire RLS student body of 300+ learners. Every two weeks, we introduce students to engaging short stories or informative fiction, paired with worksheets and writing prompts to help strengthen their English skills. Thanks to this initiative, we recently secured an illustrative book deal and hope to publish a collection next year featuring sustainability-themed stories written by talented S3–S6 students here at RLS. As a Ghanaian American, I joined PiAf hoping to deepen my understanding of African communities and leadership. Through collaborating with RLS educators, mentoring students, helping build curriculum, and embracing the steadiness of life in Rwanda, I'm growing the personal and professional skills I'll need to contribute meaningfully to African policy and international development. t







## MISSION STATEMENT

We provide high-quality secondary education in Rwanda by offering a secure and nurturing school environment that transforms vulnerable youth into future leaders and problem-solvers who champion environmental sustainability and social change.

## VISION STATEMENT

We envision quality secondary education that is universally accessible and equitable, with the aim to equip Rwanda's youth with the necessary skills and tools to develop into the next generation of skilled and compassionate leaders.

## VALUES STATEMENT

We set standards for responsibility and high achievement, and develop an inclusive, supportive, and trusting student body that is able to leverage critical thinking and make a meaningful impact in their communities and beyond. Founded upon the principles of Christianity, we recognize and acknowledge students from all religious backgrounds and beliefs by promoting a school culture of respect, awareness, and tolerance. Core to our philosophy is experiential learning, a pedagogy that empowers students through cross-disciplinary instruction, project-based learning, global awareness and character-building.

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