

# News from RLS in Rwamagana, Rwanda 2011

July

**Birthdays** in Rwanda usually don't merit much attention, but we celebrated the official birth of our school on May 7<sup>th</sup> and it was a *wonderful* occasion. In the days beforehand, everyone scrubbed, swept, washed and dusted the school and we hoisted our first official Rwandan flag on a wooden pole. Workers put up a blue and white striped tent and plastic chairs on our newly rooted grass yard and volunteers festooned the balcony with swathes of green fabric and our student-made RLS banner.



Yet I still worried: it's nice to *look* good, but is the program ready? However, despite the fact that our guest of honor was unable to attend, the students impressed the 200 people present with their poise and creativity and we enjoyed the energy and celebration of traditional dancers. Esther, age 16 in S2, wrote a terrific speech with help from some of her classmates (and no teachers) which said, in part,

*...our coming here helped us to live as in a family, with the same values and targets such as sociability, patience, compassion, hard work, self confidence, preserving our dignity and so on.*

Other students prepared skits in Kinyarwanda, with the funniest featuring a plot with a poor student heading to the USA on scholarship and a wealthy student lying to hide her bad grades from her businessman father, who it turns out, also lies about his bad grades in the past. Students' creativity with props had the audience rolling in the aisles with laughter – a Mercedes Benz was a Chinese checker board for a steering wheel and two boys walking alongside the “driver” holding mirrors for the rearview mirrors. The “Boeing jet” was a wheelbarrow on it. In my we are growing the students' even truer. On to host the treasurer Karl and when the rainbow, it



with the word *Boeing* taped in my speech, I said that in Rwanda *brilliant young people*, and performance made my words that day, we were also thrilled Rwanda School Project Smith and his wife, Linda, afternoon ended with a double seemed quite poetic.

Actually, there was one more event that day, but we didn't discover it until later. Also on May 7<sup>th</sup>, **our hens laid their first egg** (we purchased twenty baby chicks in December) and last Wednesday, we had 56 eggs – enough for each student to enjoy a fresh hardboiled egg at lunch time! This project is thanks to **Wheat Ridge Ministries**, which is also supporting our first student gardens and our Anti-AIDS Club.

From our inception in 2005, we've had plans to focus both our physical plant and our curriculum on **sustainability**. Slowly but surely, we're gathering resources to do that. 80% of our water is from rainwater catchment. Our electricity is solar (limited for now as it is a small installation but we hope gradually to increase our capacity.) Students have begun a garden using a low-till resource-intensive method from South Africa called Farming God's Way. And although we are currently using firewood in our kitchen, Wheat Ridge Ministries will also support us in the building a biogas digester, which will enable us to use methane from bovine and human waste.

However, sustainability applies to other things besides the environment, and in recent weeks I've seen a pronounced change in some of the girls in our S1 class. Antoinette, tall and broad-shouldered at age 13, spoke in a whisper in Kinyarwanda when she first came to school. She's never met her father and has seen her impoverished mother only a few times in her life, and she's been raised by distant relatives who view her as a burden. They see her value primarily in her ability to do chores. Lately she has been discovering that she has artistic talent and she recently came to my desk and told me in English that her birthday is coming soon. She's starting to bounce around the campus with other girls and laugh like a normal teen. **Rwanda's sustainability will be partly built on its women having better education and a stronger voice:** already a country where more than 50% of parliamentarians are women, Rwanda is a leader in Africa in promoting women's rights. Yet far more girls than boys drop out of secondary school and we are hopeful that girls like Antoinette will make that trend disappear. Building self-confidence is a big key!

We had some fantastic help in June in presenting girls with strong role models: **eight women and one talented young man came from Petaluma, California** to share their indefatigable spirit with our school: Melissa Becker, a primary school principal, came with five teachers from her school and three other talented friends to carry out a Teacher-to-Teacher exchange. For a week, teachers shared stories, ideas, music, questions,



dance, food and games and planned lessons together. The school was buzzing with the science equipment, recorders, art supplies, and teacher materials that they brought, but it was also buzzing with



one-to-one conversations. When the time came for them to leave, the students sang for them, using each of their names in the lyrics of the song, and there was a genuine sense of real friendships made and some tears on both sides. We hope that that song will mark a beginning and not an ending for further sharing!

Finally, four of our students are filled with anticipation. On July 19, they and 6 other youth from the Lutheran Church of Rwanda and two advisors will take off for a **two-week trip to California** to return the visit that Sierra Pacific Synod youth made to us last year. Thanks to a **Faith Active in Love** grant, they will have an astounding opportunity to learn about Youth leadership in the church, Sierra Pacific Synod's efforts to decrease its carbon footprint, and other activities of the church. Not least, they will find new horizons that may affect their ideas about their future and the future of Rwanda. They travel knowing that they represent the whole school and they carry many good wishes from their classmates.

We've received an **anonymous challenge gift to start our school dormitory** which can help the school to become sustainable by attracting paying students. If you'd like to know more about this very urgently needed project, please contact Karl Smith at [karl@mathnature.com](mailto:karl@mathnature.com).

Last week, Ignace approached me at my desk. He's a tall young man whose emotions are always written on his face, and with his brow knit, he looked at me and saw that I was trying to do several things at once. "Auntie," he said, "you are busy as a bee!" He was learning about similes and metaphors in English class. To carry it a step further, we are a hive of activity and the harvest is sweet! We are indeed blessed!

We hope your summer is great!

Grace and peace,  
Robin Strickler

In Esther's speech, she said, *Not only we rely on our efforts, but also we need you to hold our hands as we struggle to overcome the challenges of life.* Thank you all for prayers, support, advice, school materials, encouragement and new ideas. Please read below for some **new ways we're trying to grow.**

- We are seeking a young woman (age 18 to 35) who can volunteer to teach DOUBLE DUTCH or STEP (ideally, both) to high school students during the months of December and January (or two other months as negotiated.) Airfare provided. Please e-mail Robin with a letter of interest if you'd like to know more. Women of color strongly encouraged to apply.
- Our library is becoming a favorite student hangout and two students have recently told me that they read their first "whole book" just because they wanted to! We have a Book Wish List if you are interested in providing library books. Email Jean Helmick ([jean.helmick@gmail.com](mailto:jean.helmick@gmail.com)) if you would like to know more or receive the list. We are also discussing with one church the possibility of putting a Kindle in the school library! No shipping of books necessary!