

RWAMAGANA LUTHERAN SCHOOL -

News and Views from the Heart of Africa

“Thomas was late because of lost cows.” This notation in our daily log at the school says a lot about the differences between Rwanda and the USA in terms of the issues that affect our students’ lives. Students here miss school because there are too many funerals, because they have to care for sick relatives or fetch water or tend cows or because they’ve caught malaria. Despite these challenges, they care deeply about school and respond seriously to reminders to do well. And like millions of teens around the world, they love football (soccer) and hip hop, they notice the latest fashions and hear the latest news and want to know more about the world around them.

They just finished their third term and 30th week of English Enrichment. The term included a visit from Megumi Sasaki, who showed them origami and Japanese writing, a session each for the girls and the boys on reproductive health with a teacher from Peace Corps, lessons about weather and climate, matrices and probability, parts of speech and the biological parts of flowers as well as lessons in drawing perspective and music notation. On their last day, they offered five-minute presentations on various topics in front of each other and visiting adults. The whole room whooped with delight when George, age 14, gave an exuberant description of “Mountain Everest” and explained that “it is so cold up there that a person can die and there is so much ice; it is amazing to me!” Shukuru and Consolata, girls who had been reticent to speak up, astonished everyone with their confidence and clear pronunciation and poise, and one former street boy delivered both a good presentation about Nelson Mandela in English and a rap song in Kinyarwanda about the prejudice and apartheid he had studied in our social studies class. I was delighted to see their increased interest in books, their greater confidence and their willingness to ask questions when they didn’t understand.

Recently, we gave out new backpacks to students who showed particular improvement in their English efforts (and to our teachers, who didn’t have briefcases or backpacks!), and we are very thankful to members of Community Lutheran Church in Sterling, VA, who provided them! One student wrote in his journal:

“Thank you for giving me gift my own. I’m very exciting because you choose from all class, that is interesting for me. I want to speak English very well.”

Another said, *“For me to study English is a big problem but I try hard and slowly by slowly I can become good. I hope one day to lead morning circle.”*

Their journals are sometimes windows into other untold stories. Another orphaned former street boy wrote, *“On last Sunday my brother came to Rwamagana to visit me. He came to see me because he was thinking he wants to see me and he wants to know about my school. I was very thankful to God to see him. I will never forget that day in my life because it is the first time someone comes to visit me.”*

Another 17-year-old wrote to our pen-pals at Tapestry School in Buffalo, New York, *“Do you have parents? I haven’t parents so if you have them you are lucky.”*

After the presentations, the students received their certificates and scattered to their respective homes or lodgings for about two months. We teachers and staff reflected on the year, looking both at our successes and at things we want to expand or do better next year. Teachers commented that they were surprised that eating lunch with the students turned out to be enjoyable and a good way to get to know them better. Small group study activities, daily reading in class and student presentations were also features that we hope to enrich and expand. At the same time, we want to practice more ways of assessing students and helping them to improve study skills.

We also know that we need to do more to communicate with parents, invite their participation and learn about students’ home life. On Community Clean-up Day, the widowed mother of one girl dressed up in her good clothes and walked 19 kilometers (12 miles) to tell us that her daughter was ill and couldn’t come that

day and that she needed bus fare for the following week to attend school. She then helped us to clean the school and also told us that she wakes her daughter at 5 a.m. so she can study by candlelight before she goes to school. Her efforts paid off...her daughter surpassed some other students who were ahead of her at the beginning of the year. I was so impressed by this mother's commitment to her daughter's education. We are now well into construction, with our concrete superstructure beginning to rise to the second story level and it is very exciting to see! With the completion of this building, we will have enough space to contain us for two full years and we will satisfy the Ministry of Education's requirements for classroom space. We'll have reliable solar electricity, thanks to Koinonia Foundation's grant, and we will have a roof water harvesting system to maintain good sanitation and irrigation.

Every week, we are touched by the Herculean efforts of one student or another and every week we cry inwardly over some of their challenges. I know that 2009 has been a difficult year for all of us economically and yet I also see that **every** year has been difficult for most Rwandans. I want to ask you in this time of relative plenty at the holiday season if you might consider a gift in honor of a family member or friend to scholarship a student or donate bricks. (We currently have funding to complete the superstructure and the roof!) We cannot fix the whole world's ills, but I can tell you after this year, we **can** make a **significant** difference in the lives of these young people, and by extension, we can help to rebuild a nation that was torn asunder by genocide and civil war. We start our new school year in January: please join us in making this year a new beginning for our students!

Blessings to all of you! Happy Holidays!

Robin Strickler

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q. Who are your teachers?

A. Our four teachers are Rwandan and all of them graduated from the Kigali Institute of Education (KIE). In the future, we also hope to invite short-term (1 semester to 2 years) teachers from other countries.

Q. How can I donate?

A. You can send a check to our treasurer: **Karl Smith, Rwanda School Project, c/o Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 1300 St. Francis Road, Santa Rosa, CA 95409**. The tax ID number for The Rwanda School Project is 20-3545455. You can also connect to our webpage and donate by credit card at www.rwandaschoolproject.org

Q. If I sponsor a needy student, can I communicate with him or her?

A. Yes. You can send email to our school email or you can use the postal service (Rwanda's mail is generally very reliable for letters.) Our students don't have daily access to email but they can write occasionally and they can use the regular mail. If you prefer, you can also remain anonymous and you can get a report at the end of the year about the student you sponsored.

Q. How much does it cost for a student to attend for a year?

A. Tuition, which includes books, materials and uniforms, is \$1,200 a year. We are on a three-term schedule and three \$400 payments can be made.

Q. What if I can't afford to sponsor a student but I still want to help?

A. You can also make your donation with the designation "Scholarship Fund" in any amount. This will go to the Student Scholarship Fund, which helps particularly promising students to get assistance in varying amounts.

Q. What is the governing structure of the Rwanda School Project and the Rwamagana Lutheran School?

A. The Rwamagana Lutheran School is a project that grew out of the Rwanda School Project, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization registered in California with a Board of Directors from the USA. This year, the fledgling School Governing Board in Rwanda took steps to incorporate as a local non-profit called the Lutheran Educational Development Association (LEDA), enabling us to be recognized as a local entity by the Rwandan Government.