

DEMOCRACY

Ethiopian Israelis provide training for Rwandan youth village

By Stephanie Freid December 25, 2006

Jean-Pierre Nkuranga was twenty in 1994 when he hid in the bushes outside his home in Rwanda and watched helplessly as Hutu militiamen ruthlessly attacked his family members. He lost four siblings and both parents in the carnage that was later known as Rwanda's genocide.

"Children heads of household were common - some as young as ten. The kids would put together households of other kids and live in the streets or build tent camps with leaves and mud." Nkuranga said.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide left over 800,000 Tutsis dead. One of the most devastating aftermaths of the tragedy was the approximately 1,200,000 children - almost 15% of the Rwandan population - who became instant orphans and lost their homes forever. Nkuranga became the parent to his four remaining siblings in the aftermath of the violence and he eventually took in six additional neighboring children.

Overcome by the enormity of loss, Nkuranga vowed to help build a future for the children orphaned in Rwanda. And today, he's beginning to achieve that goal with the help of Israel.

Nkuranga was part of a ten-person delegation of Rwandan youth experts who recently spent a week at the Yemin Orde Youth Village south of Haifa in order to gain tools for opening the Agahozo-Shalom Village in Rwanda, which will be modeled after Yemin Orde.

A high percentage of Yemin Orde's children have been of Ethiopian origin, who suffered through similar stories of parent separation, trauma and displacement following Israel's airlifts - Operations Moses and Solomon in the 80s and 90s. Initiated to safeguard Ethiopia's Jews from famine and political persecution, the airlifts brought more than 22,000 Ethiopians out of Africa, and in the process, some children were orphaned and others faced various hardships.

Now, some of those children-turned-adults are helping the Rwandan counselors in establishing the program for the orphans of Rwanda.

"A large percentage of Ethiopian children have had to straddle the social and cultural worlds of Israel versus Ethiopia and it has been difficult," explained Yissaschar Mekonen, Director of the Israeli-Ethiopian Advisory Team to the Rwandan Village. A graduate of Yemin Orde, Mekonen immigrated to Israel in the early 70's

"It has trickled down from the parents. When your parent can't help you with homework because he can't read or write... Yemin Orde offers a parenting alternative," he told ISRAEL21c.

The Rwanda Agahozo-Shalom Village goal will provide a comprehensive response to youth displacement by establishing a multi-faceted youth village like Yemin Orde, based on the concept of the 'Village' as home. Children are fostered by a holistic and protective environment to help them overcome trauma and abandonment issues.

"We are here to get professional, consistent modeling," Nkuranga told ISRAEL21c during a break in the week-long series of meetings, seminars and information gathering. "Back home, urgent needs are being met and we're putting out fires. Based on what we learn here, we'll be able to take our children all the way to autonomy and guarantee their future. We can organize their care so that they re-build themselves in an autonomous way."

Manhattan-based project initiator and director Anne Heyman explained that the idea for the village was sparked during a dinner conversation. "I asked Paul (i.e. Paul Rusesabinga, subject of the film *Hotel Rwanda*): 'What's the biggest problem you have in Rwanda?' and he told me that in a country where there are 1.2 million orphans out of a population of 8 million, there is no future for that country."

For Heyman, Rusesabinga's words were a calling. She began researching orphanages and phoning contacts which led her earlier this year to then-Yemin Orde director Chaim Peri. Since deciding to model the Rwandan village after the Yemin Orde model, her life has been a flurry of shuttles between the US, Rwanda and Israel where she is organizing teams, buying land and drumming up donors.

The Ethiopian-Israeli and Rwandan collaboration was a natural extension of Heyman's plan - The Ethiopian team has traveled once to Rwanda to consult locally and the Rwandan team has been in Israel twice.

During their week in Israel, Rwandan committee members attended lectures and meetings to glean information on everything from channeling extra-curricular interests to fostering cultural practices to troubleshooting problem areas.

The delegation spent long hours on Yemin Orde's campus to gather in-depth information about the philosophies, functions and daily routines of Yemin Orde staff roles, from counselors to advisors to administrators to house mothers. They also took visual notes on the layout for modeling learning areas, living quarters, dining room and recreation spaces in the Rwanda village.

Teams worked easily together, sharing ideas, laughter and cultural cues non-Africans might not intercept. "I do this 'O' sign with my thumb and index finger and the Rwandans know it means 'zero'. Other people think I mean 'okay'," Mekonen explained. "It's small, but it's part of the larger picture."

The exchange will continue up to the projected 2008 launch of the Agahozo-Shalom Village. According to Heyman, during initial stages, a team of a dozen Ethiopian-Israelis will be on the ground in Rwanda for several weeks to oversee operations and troubleshoot when necessary.

"Initially I felt like: What do I have to offer them? We were a few people from Ethiopia who walked a few kilometers to Sudan and were airlifted out. What can I tell someone who saw

his entire family murdered?' Mekonen poses.

"But it turns out that our story of leaving our Ethiopian home and culture and succeeding in Israeli society is very big to them. We did it well, sometimes with parents still behind in Ethiopia. This success is what they want to model for the Rwandan youth left behind."

The Rwandan advisory committee includes a member of Rwanda's education ministry, an AIDS counselor, an expert on widow and children survivors of genocide, and a child-headed household specialist.

"The communication and the sharing show us that the concept works and gives us the hope for doing something similar when we return home," Rwandan reconciliation advisor Albert Nzamukewereka told Israel21C. "We don't have to make a cultural transition - we're from the same place, really - and that makes it easier."

When Yemin Orde graduate Racheli Ugado traveled to Rwanda in July as part of the Ethiopian-Israeli Village consultancy, she described it as revisiting home. "I came [to Israel] on Operation Solomon when I was seven, so I remember a lot. Rwanda felt like being back in Ethiopia. I'm still very connected to it. Helping my brothers in Africa so that they can help themselves feels natural."

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