



Anne Heyman - building a village of hope

By Julie Jacobs

It all began on November 14, 2005, with a Hillel-sponsored lecture at Tufts University, where Paul Rusesabagina spoke about the 1994 genocide in his native country of Rwanda. Rusesabagina's valiant effort, to protect Tutsi refugees from the Hutu militia by housing them in the hotel he managed, was depicted in the Oscar-nominated film *Hotel Rwanda*.

In the audience that evening was philanthropist Anne Heyman, a benefactor of the lecture, along with her husband, Seth Merrin. At the dinner following, they were seated with Rusesabagina. During a conversation that centered on the genocide and its devastating aftermath, an inquiry from Merrin sparked an idea in Heyman that would ultimately change her life and send her across the world to both Israel and Rwanda.

"My husband asked Paul, 'What is the biggest problem facing Rwanda today?' He said, 'In a country where you have 1.2 million orphans in a population of 8 million people, there's nothing you can do for that country unless you figure out how to help those children,'" recounts Heyman, lithe and casually dressed in a yellow T-shirt and khaki capris, her hair swept up in a ponytail, enjoying a cappuccino on the first day of summer in an Upper West Side café. "Almost immediately, the idea popped into my head. Do a youth village. I went home and just couldn't let it go."

She turned to the Internet to research the concept and mentioned it at meetings for other organizations in which she was involved. She connected with Steve Schwager, executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), who referred her to Chaim Peri, Ed.D., director of the Yemin Orde Youth Village in the Carmel mountain region of Israel. Yemin Orde was established in 1953 to care for orphans of the Holocaust, and since then it has become a home and leading educational establishment for disadvantaged youth, mostly from Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, and South America. Peri thought the project most worthwhile, and met with Heyman during a visit to Manhattan in the winter of 2006. After that, things "snowballed," and Heyman was well on her way to founding the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village (ASYV) in Rwanda. (Agahozo is Kinyarwanda for "a place to dry one's tears.")

Today, with logistical support from the JDC, a site chosen in Rwamagana, and a well-known Rwandan architectural firm working on drawings, Heyman is in the thick of it and very happy to be there. "Rwamagana was chosen because that is the next area slated for development by the Rwandan government. A paved road goes there and, also, the local government was very receptive," Heyman explains.

ASYV will work in partnership with Yemin Orde and follow its successful model "to further the treatment and growth of abandoned children and youth by placing them in a safe, structured environment with a rich community life, while minimizing threats and exposing them to elements of parental wholeness." Additionally, it will "provide them with quality education while adequately preparing them for their future roles in society." Ethiopian Israelis, many of them graduates of Yemin Orde, are helping to bring the model to Rwanda, sharing their own personal experiences and how the Jewish philosophies of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *tikkun halev* (repairing the heart) are central to the creation of a successful youth village.

Apart from all the logistical activities, aimed at opening ASYV's doors in fall 2008 and beginning the first academic year in January 2009, Heyman is busy finding money as the sole fundraiser. She is targeting individuals and family foundations, and has received a significant challenge grant from a major corporation. Among her many hopes for the village is the creation of a board of governors that will take over responsibility for the annual budget after the initial start-up. For now, she's proceeding one day at a time on this special

project that has become so important for her. She exudes a contagious enthusiasm as she details the journey to date, almost in disbelief that she has gotten this far.

Shortly after her meeting with Peri, Heyman flew to Israel last year over Passover to see Yemin Orde and speak with staff and affiliates. About 20 people gathered in the village's library, most of whom were Ethiopian graduates, to gauge interest in the project as well as its feasibility. "At this point, I wasn't looking for anything beyond support for the idea of bringing a youth village to Rwanda," remembers Heyman. "We started with, 'Where is Rwanda and why should we care about it?' Five hours later, it was, 'When can we go and why don't you have a partner to work with there?'"

Two associates of Heyman—a friend, Tina Wyatt, who is now the ASYV Project Manager, and the Ugandan head of a medical fellowship program started by the Heyman-Merrin Family Foundation—then traveled to Rwanda to convene with government officials there. Their response was overwhelmingly positive, which was great news for Heyman, who back home was making appointments with any agency in the New York metropolitan area that had anything to do with Rwanda. She attended 20 meetings in three weeks.

The momentum continued as, that September, the JDC came on board. In October, Heyman returned to Israel with Sifa Nsengimana, the country director for Rwanda who now serves as ASYV's executive director. The pair spent a week at Yemin Orde, learning about the village's programs and absorbing its culture. Heyman then visited Rwanda in November to scout locations and assemble a Rwandan Advisory Board, which met up in Israel in December to spend time at Yemin Orde.

Early this year, the architectural firm that was hired for ASYV visited Yemin Orde to view the physical plant. ASYV will mimic that layout and will accommodate 500 orphaned teenagers. It will offer a high school, library, church, central dining hall, medical clinic, and playing fields surrounded by staff and student housing. Eligibility criteria, other than orphan status and the fact that children will come from every geographic district of Rwanda, has not yet been established, and Heyman will not be involved in the selection process.

As for the children who do eventually come to ASYV, Heyman hopes that after they leave they will return to their homes and help rebuild Rwanda, perhaps even replicate the youth village elsewhere in the country. Throughout most of the development phase, she and her team have met with the Rwandan Ministries of Education, Health, and Youth, Sports and Culture, all of which she says "get it. They are quite discerning and understand the potential of this project.

"There's a timeline in everybody's life: past, present, and future. For these kids, there's a break between past and present, and unless you repair that break, they can't live in the present or dream about a future. The way you repair that break is through tikkun halev—individual therapies aimed at that particular child—and tikkun olam—doing for others, which has been proven to have very beneficial personal consequences. Everyone in the village is obligated to participate in community activities. They're told from the minute they arrive at the village that although they've been through a hard time, they've been saved for a reason and they have value."

Heyman's efforts with regard to ASYV have not gone unnoticed. She was acknowledged at a Clinton Global Initiative conference, and this past March received the distinguished Sidney Shapiro Tzedakah Award from the Jewish Funders Network. The award honors philanthropy that is "creative, strategic, collaborative, innovative, forward-thinking, and responsive to tangible and urgent societal needs."

Born in South Africa, Heyman moved to Boston with her family when she was 15. She later graduated from law school and worked for the Manhattan District Attorney's office until the birth of her third child. Two years ago, she and her husband established the Heyman-Merrin Family Foundation, of which she is currently president.

"We decided we wanted all of our philanthropy to create a positive Jewish image, which means that everything that we do should be done through a Jewish lens, whether it involves creating a library or giving to



UJA. Whatever it is, it needs to be done in a Jewish way with an understanding of the Jewish values that are behind the giving.”

Focusing on the needs of the elderly and children, teens in particular, the foundation has endowed a teen fellows program at Jewish Community Centers of America, among other endeavors. It has supported many programs in Israel and Russia that help fight hunger, and has reached out to victims of the tsunami of 2004. Heyman, herself, is involved with the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York, Young Judea, and the Tufts University Hillel, and presently co-chairs the board of trustees of Dorot, an organization that helps homeless and homebound elderly.

Of the new Jewish philanthropy that rests on “not just opening the wallet, but deciding where the money goes,” she remarks. “It used to be you gave money to UJA, for instance, and UJA decided what needed to be done with it. Today, people want to know where their money is going and what it’s doing. There’s even been an increase on the third level of giving, which is what I’m doing. It’s about people seeing a need for something and creating their own programs in response.”

While she is proud of what she has accomplished with ASYV, she sighs when she thinks about having had to be away from her family a lot. “I didn’t realize the magnitude of the project or the impact it would have on my life,” she admits. “But my husband and kids have been unbelievable through it all, and they came to the groundbreaking with me in August. My kids totally understand how important social action is, and have completely stepped up. They have really good hearts.

“Since I started doing this work, I have a renewed faith in mankind. I’ve gotten to meet incredible individuals who are doing amazing things,” she offers, her voice cracking a bit with emotion. “It’s really been a privilege to do this. I think everybody can be philanthropic and make a difference. If you’ve got a good idea, people will come and help you.”

Please see www.agahozo-shalom.org for further details or to donate funds.