

Local woman works to heal African orphans

Israeli youth village serves a model for Rwandan facility

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With expertise gleaned from a successful program in Israel, a Livingston woman is seeking support for a youth village in Rwanda for teenage orphans scarred by genocide.

The newly opened center is called Agahozo Shalom. It was inspired by a youth village in Israel called Yemin Orde, founded in 1953 to care for orphans of the Nazi Holocaust.



Tina Wyatt, center, enjoys a playful moment with counselors at the Agahozo Shalom youth village in Rwanda.

“Yemin Orde is a model,” said Tina Wyatt, who is working as a paid consultant for the project in Rwanda. The village, located just south of Haifa, “has done tremendous work in healing kids who have come from traumatized backgrounds and making them whole again so they can lead productive lives.”

After nearly one million members of the Tutsi tribe were murdered by rival Hutu militiamen in 1994, some 1.2 million young people were left without parents and homes. On Dec. 15, 14 years after the slaughter, Agahozo Shalom celebrated its opening day and the first 125 of an anticipated 500 Rwandan teenagers moved in.

“A youth village is not an orphanage,” Wyatt insisted. “The idea behind it is to recreate the rhythms of these young people’s lives.”

“You and I get up every day and have breakfast and go to work. These kids don’t have that. It has been taken away from them forever. But we teach the kids that what happened to them in the past does not have to be their legacy.”

Wyatt explained that her organization works with teens because “that’s where the biggest need is. For some of them, their whole families have been wiped out. There are no photos. Some of them don’t even know their birthdays or what their real names are. It is amazing how strong these people are.”

Much of the funding for the project comes Liquidnet Holdings, a New York-based financial technology firm supported by contributions from individuals and foundations.

The village is a special project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which provides educational, medical, and social work experts to guide its operations — but not financial support. The JDC plans to train and eventually cede control of Agahozo Shalom to Rwandans.



The teenage orphans and their caregivers gather for a meeting at Agahozo Shalom.

Wyatt became involved in the project through her friend Anne Heyman, a South African-born social activist. Heyman had worked with Paul Rusesabagina, the Kigali hotel manager whose rescue of more than 1,000 potential victims was immortalized in the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*.

“He told Anne about his country’s orphan population, and Anne got to thinking about how Israel addressed a similar issue after the Holocaust with youth villages,” Wyatt said. “Her passion took hold in me.”

Heyman helped adapt the Israeli model to the needs of the Rwandan orphans.

Unlike their counterparts at Yemin Orde — who live with college-age peer counselors — the Rwandans hired older women as housemothers, many of whom had lost their own husbands and children to genocide.

“The real notion is that it’s really through helping others that you heal yourself,” Heyman told a conference on genocide prevention Dec. 25 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. “The kids will be very much taught about how important it is to participate in your community, to take responsibility for your community, and to share what you have with others.”

‘They are all Rwandans’

“We started from scratch,” said Wyatt. “We purchased the land and got a local architect in New York to work with Rwandan architects and construction companies. Everything in the village has been done by Rwandans and all of the village’s employees are Rwandans as well,” she explained.



Agahozo Shalom has also had the benefit of some visiting Ethiopian graduates from the Yemin Orde village. Some will return to Rwanda as mentors and counselors.

“Each person who comes from Israel will volunteer — some for a few months, some for longer. It’s a great way for them to give back,” said Wyatt.

Inside Agahozo Shalom, the youngsters no longer divide themselves along tribal lines — Hutus and Tutsis. “They don’t speak of that,” Wyatt insisted. “They are all Rwandans.”

Talk of ethnic conflict and retribution still exists “in some outlying areas of the country, but the president of the country has said, ‘We are all Rwandans now,’ and they are moving forward in that vein. It’s wonderful.”

Agahozo Shalom is working with the government to provide homes for orphans from each of the country’s 30 districts, with the ratio of 60 percent girls to 40 percent boys, reflecting Rwanda’s demographics.

“These kids have very tough lives,” said Wyatt. “When they showed up at the village, most of them just had the clothes on their backs, and some were carrying paper bags with maybe an extra pair of socks. Their parents died from the genocide or HIV/AIDS.

“Yeah, it’s tough. You meet so many people who work so hard in helping the orphan population, whether it is fighting for their rights or bringing food to them.”

In 2005, Wyatt gave up a career as a project manager in a New York stock brokerage to volunteer; her only experience with working with teenagers, she said, is “being a parent.” Her daughter is a sophomore at Winona State University in Minnesota.

Last May, Wyatt went on the village payroll as a consultant. “I’m a jack of all trades, master of none,” she said. “I get called in when I’m needed. This is far more rewarding.”

She has visited Rwanda six times during the village’s construction phase and plans another trip there in June. In the meantime, she is concentrating on raising funds in New Jersey.

“Now that the village is open, there are operating expenses we need to raise money for, and we still have ongoing construction over the next couple of years. This year we have a \$5 million nut to crack. Once it is completely constructed, the operating expenses will be about \$1.5 million a year. We are educating, housing, clothing, feeding, and providing medical care. We are 100 percent responsible for these kids — just like you do for your own kids,” she said.

What drives Wyatt in part is the Jewish imperative of *tikun olam*.



“I believe if you can save one life, you can save the world,” she said. “These kids will grow up and get great educations. They will grow up to be leaders in their communities and give back through education or through business or whatever the case may be.

“You can bring people up out of total devastation, and their lives don’t have to continue to stay that way.”