

You are viewing the print version of this article. [Click here to view the full version.](#)

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Mo. woman works in Rwanda with Tutsi and Hutu orphans

By MARGARET GILLERMAN/St. Louis Post-Dispatch

January 1, 2009 | 6:06 p.m. CST

ST. LOUIS — About a month ago, Tanya Fredman was sipping coffee and animatedly discussing art at a Clayton coffeehouse near the home of her parents and younger brothers in University City.

Now she is more than 8,000 miles away on a jungle hilltop in the African country of Rwanda, helping Tutsi and Hutu orphans at Agahozo Shalom Youth Village.

Fredman, 24, arrived in Rwanda on Dec. 9. In a Dec. 15 post on her [blog](#), she wrote "Muraho!" — a reassuring Rwandan hello for her parents, Carey and Susie Fredman.

Tanya Fredman will spend eight months there, about an hour outside of Kigali, Rwanda's capital, which was depicted in "Hotel Rwanda," a movie about that country's genocide.

Almost 1 million people were murdered in Rwanda during the genocide, in which Hutu militias sought to wipe out the Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Because of the genocide and AIDS, about 1.2 million orphans now live in Rwanda.

Fredman's visit is part of a yearlong mission she calls "Painting Hope." After graduating last spring with an art degree from Brandeis University, she signed up for a year as a volunteer with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. She's dividing her time teaching art at two world trouble spots, the Middle East and Rwanda. At both places, she is working with young refugees and orphans.

Fredman believes she can use art to help heal the hearts of the troubled youths who experienced severe traumas, such as war and genocide.

"Art can be a powerful way of looking at what they've been through and give them new perceptions," she said. "For me, art is a lot more than just colors and shapes. It's about the way people relate to the world and to other people around them. It's something deeper within."

Fredman got her taste for combining volunteering with world travel in 2006 when she spent seven weeks helping build a community center in Ghana with the American Jewish World Service. African chiefs welcomed her with blessings, and she was moved by the exuberant dancing of a group of young children. She jumped in and joined them.

"We were all smiling, laughing, holding hands," she said. "I felt like I found a connection with the people there."

Fredman already feels welcome in Rwanda. The Rwandan chefs are careful to help her observe her traditions as a modern Orthodox Jew. She will live on freshly cooked meals of cassava, rice, beans and vegetables.

"They have made (it) quite easy for me to feel very comfortable here and are interested in learning more about why I practice religion the way I do, as many of them are very religious themselves," Fredman wrote on her blog.

Fredman has heard personal accounts of the genocide from counselors and house mothers.

"Most notable and difficult to understand is the desire to forgive," she wrote on her blog. She is optimistic about the new government in Rwanda.

"Right now there is peace," she said. "There's a new official policy to not distinguish between Hutus and Tutsis but to live together only as Rwandans. But the issues of the past are still very painful."

In the Yemin Orde village near Haifa, Israel, this fall, Fredman worked with children from 20 countries, including Ethiopia, Sudan, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and China. Some were refugees from Darfur. At Yemin Orde, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, she and the children created a mosaic and then a colorful mural. The mosaic's theme was "Gather Us Together From the Four Corners of the World."

One of her most inspiring experiences at Yemin Orde was a visit from Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, a child survivor of the Nazi genocide of Jews. Yemin Orde was founded in 1953 for orphans of the Holocaust.

Men and women from Rwanda — survivors of the 1994 genocide there —

visited the Israeli village that weekend. One Rwandan who addressed the children said: "Together we are going to change the world."

The Rwandan teachers led the children in clapping, singing, stamping and twirling. They explained a dance that a man does before giving the woman he loves a cow.

As the only American in Yemin Orde, Fredman was responsible for translating English rap songs and MTV news. "I did not forget to mention that being a St. Louisan I grew up near Nelly," she wrote on her blog.

Fredman attended grade school at Epstein Hebrew Academy in Olivette and then went to all-girls Block Yeshiva High School, graduating in 2003. After a year in Israel, she went on to Brandeis, spending a summer in Ghana and a semester in Rome.

Fredman says she's motivated by "tikkun olam," a Hebrew expression meaning "to mend the world."

Through her art, she wrote, she hopes she's "making (the world) more colorful along the way."