



## **Nir Lahav**

Village director

Six weeks have passed since our children arrived in the village. For all of us it has been very intensive. We had to be creative, flexible, and work for long hours. I can say that it is all worth it and that it is very rewarding - our kids are smiling and are enjoying their lives in the village and with us.

It is not an easy task to start something from the very beginning. It is very complicated to start a youth village since it encompasses so many aspects of life -from plumbing to education, from farming to wellness center and many more. It seems that everybody in the village is ready to do his and her best to reach our long term goals. This readiness of everyone is not restricted to the Agahozo-Shalom staff alone but encompasses Fair Construction employees, Bear and many others who are working together in order to realize our dream.

Walking around the beautiful paths of the village which are becoming greener and greener everyday (especially when it rains), one can hear music lesson conducted by our newly opened art and music center, or the vocal sound of Agahozo Shalom Chorus. If we continue to walk we might encounter our volleyball team practicing- both boys and girls, or we might see our soccer team playing on our almost ready soccer field. During our afternoon walk we will probably hear the traditional Rwandan singing group ("Itotero") having a lot of fun, or we may encounter a group of kids studying English and playing games at our Learning Center. Yes, it is a very vibrant place where life starts early in the morning around 6:00 AM and subsides at 10:00 PM.

School starts at 7:30 officially, but our children come to school much earlier, waiting for the teachers to arrive from Kigali. I have never seen a group of students so eager to learn as our kids. It gives all of us great pleasure and an incentive to teach these kids both at school and after school. A day before the *Liquidnet Family High School* opened its gates all children got their learning supplies in new school bags, which were donated to us. Seeing the joy of these kids was an unforgettable moment. For most of them it was the first time to have all of this.

In our village we emphasize on broad spectrum education- formal and informal. After school hours all children attend at least 2 after school activities, which are conducted by the counselors and by the house mothers. There are a variety of activities to choose from- art, music, karate, volleyball, basketball, soccer, traditional cooking, singing and Itorerero. The *Learning Center* and the *Art & Music Center* are open 3 days a week and provide an opportunity for the kids to do homework, to read a book in the library, to gradually learn about computers, to play an instrument or to draw.

The households have their quality time daily. Each day is concluded with a "family time". This time is for the house members to be together and to talk about the day which has passed and about the new day to come. I feel that gradually, each house is becoming a family. A family that can support its people and that fills its members with joy and confidence.

The farm is growing every day. From a deserted field of a few weeks ago, we have now a farm, which the entire village is proud of. We are now in the midst of building our cowshed and the chicken coop. The organic vegetable garden is being prepared for the rainy season (March) and we have already planted Orange, Tangerine, Mango, Avocado and



Banana trees and many pineapples as well. Kids work in the farm every Saturday and some of them, voluntarily, help during their free time.

We have a wonderful group of volunteers in the village. It makes this village a unique place with an international flavor that we all enjoy. There are what we call "cultural" differences that we have yet to bridge and language barriers that we have to overcome, but the benefit of having different people, who speak different languages and who come from different worlds, is huge and needs no explanation.

As we enter the last weeks of construction, we are in the process of finalizing the landscape plan for the village. Chris Walsh, a landscape architect was with us for 10 days to help with this. Chris designed a complete landscape plan for the village, and we walked for hours each day from one part of the village to another, from top to bottom, as he got busy perfecting it. The result is great!!! In a few days, we will be preoccupied with making the plan a reality.

Water is the most disturbing issue. The village is constructed in a place where municipal water is available, but supply does not meet the demand, and we've hardly had any running water for the last few weeks. We found a source of spring water which we use for drinking and proceeded to digging our own borehole, but so far it's not done yet, we still have to fetch water and fill the tanks ourselves. Hopefully, in less than two weeks we will finally pump water out from that 84 meters underground, directly to our new water tank in the center of the village. Having running water will be a significant improvement of the standard of living on the village.

We had some health issues with our kids. Some of them arrived at the village not knowing they were sick (mainly Malaria). We had to hospitalize some. At this moment, everybody is back in the village and healthy. Only a few days after the children's arrival, Dr. Rick gave a physical examination to all kids. Most of the children were found to be in good health. There are some with eye problems and with skin problems and we will have to deal with those in the coming weeks. Our nurse, Elodie with the help of the volunteering nurse, Vered, did a wonderful job organizing the clinic. They bought all needed medications and outlined the clinic procedures. The "Health and Wellness Center" deals not only with the physical wellbeing of the children but also with their mental health, we have two professionals tending to their mental and social wellbeing at all times.

Feeding 200 people is always a difficult job. Doing it with missing equipment (container from Dubai delayed), in an unfinished kitchen and with no running water is quite a challenge. However, despite these difficulties we have good food, mostly on time and enough for everyone. A week ago the bakery was completed and we are now enjoying fresh bread every morning. It is a real treat. The kitchen staff is working around the clock, to provide us with 3 meals a day. They start their working day at around 4:00 AM and end it late at night. We all appreciate their hard work.

To conclude I would say that much was accomplished in 6 weeks. Much needs to be accomplished in the near future. But, the most important thing is that we have great kids who are eager to take the "once in a lifetime opportunity" that was given to them and with two hands. We have great staff that gradually understands Agahozo- Shalom youth Village's philosophy. The staff is committed and is willing to learn and to go through change, so that we can realize the dream together.

Thank you,  
Nir

The Agahozo Shalom Youth Village is a Special Project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee