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June 2009

Last week eight folks from Liquidnet, including myself, went to Rwanda for the official opening of the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village (ASYV), a home for Rwandan orphans which the Liquidnet community has helped to build. The village actually opened in December when the first 125 orphans entered. Even though we have been involved since the inception of this project, being at the village and talking to the students, counselors and teachers had a profound effect on all of us. It put a lot of things into perspective, especially in these times. I thought I would share some thoughts with you.

With names like Innocent and Patience, every kid and counselor has a story that could best be expressed only in the goriest of horror movies.

Innocent, a counselor, sat down with our group for over an hour telling us his story. In 100 days, he narrowly escaped death no less than 7 times: Fleeing from a line he was made to stand in where one by one the people in front of him were being hacked to death by machete; running away from another group of soldiers that were too tired from the physical labor of hacking people to death to chase him; being waved through a checkpoint because a soldier was lighting his cigarette. He was ultimately caught, shot and hacked three times in the head with a machete and left for dead. A few days later he woke up on a mound of dead bodies. It took him a while to realize he was alive, mostly by looking at the hacked up corpses that surrounded him. Innocent climbed out of the mass grave and, aided by the instinct to survive, knew he had to get to a hospital to live. His head was so swollen he had to lift his forehead over his eyes just to see. His terror continued as between him and the hospital were the roaming bands of genocidaires who continued their government sponsored killing sprees. Innocent was captured again and tortured but miraculously managed to live to tell his story and eventually to help others.

There are roughly 200 people in the village each with a past of similar atrocities inflicted on them or witnessed by them – often directed at their parents, brothers and sisters.

Six months ago, theirs was an unimaginable story of adversity and survival and it could be debated as to whether they were the ones lucky to survive or rather the ones doomed to live.



Today theirs is no longer the story of adversity but the story of life, of hope and of future. Innocent lived, his massive wounds healed and he put himself through university. He was hired as an informal education counselor to care for and counsel the kids of the ASYV.

Emmanuel a student, who has never been on a plane, wants to be a pilot. His father was studying to be a pilot when he was killed. As a form of self healing, Emmanuel is determined to honor his father's memory by completing that mission and learning to fly a plane. Emmanuel six months ago knew no English, had never seen a computer and went to school where obedience and submission through various forms of punishment were the main subjects taught by teachers who themselves had very little education. The day of the village inauguration, visitors went to the different classrooms in the Liquidnet Family High School where students taught classes in the subjects they were studying. Emmanuel taught physics class entirely in English using PowerPoint slides that he created.

I will tell you with no uncertainty that we, the vast majority of us, do not truly know the meaning of adversity. We all experience hardships and difficulties, but what these kids survived requires words that I don't believe have been invented yet.

Every student I spoke to said they spent the first few months not believing the village was real, going to sleep expecting the next day they would be returned to their former lives.

For most of us, the significance of what the village has created came in the form of a song the kids and the school's principal wrote and sang at the inauguration of the Liquidnet Family High School. They sang a song to their parents in Kinyarwanda so that their parents would understand. They sang to tell their parents in heaven that they can finally rest, that they (the kids) had found a new family, new parents who love and care for them, new siblings to care for. They wanted their parents to know that their long journey from the genocide was over, that their children will be okay.

I think it became clear to all of us with the culmination of that song what the Liquidnet community has helped to give to the kids of the ASYV. It is the gift of easing their burdens of why they survived but their families did not. It is the gift of giving them a purpose to live. It is the gift of allowing them to comfort the souls of their parents and set them free. It is the gift of a better life.

What we learned from our trip to Rwanda is that we all have a greater purpose today. We learned perspective. That what we consider adversity, we should be thankful for; that we



should look to the kids of the ASYV to teach us that *any* adversity can be overcome. That we should use this troubled time and attack it with everything we've got. Our collective determination to succeed and improve the lives of our own families today extends beyond our personal needs. We have proven that together that we can change industries; that we can do well while doing good; that we can help change the world.

For more information on the ASYV, visit www.agahozo-shalom.org