



Hello again from the beautiful hills of Rwamagana, home of the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village. It is 7:15 in the morning and as I sit outside drinking my coffee (3rd cup of the day already) I am watching the children as they walk up to start their day at the Liquidnet Family High School. Today is the first day of exams – the end of second semester. It is amazing that the children are finished with half of their first year at Agahozo-Shalom.

Last night I visited with one of the families during “Family Time”. Family time is the hour between 9 and 10 at night when all the children get together with their counselor and house mother and either just discuss the day’s events, topics of interest or on occasion have someone come in and talk to them about an important issue. I thought perhaps they would not want me to come, or spend that much time but they were, as always, very pleased to see me and very welcoming. In fact one of the young men from the house came to “pick me up” at my house, just to make sure I knew where I was going! For the first night before examinations the house was remarkably calm; it was apparent to me that for most of the children, as ambitious as they are, had the examinations in the right perspective. Our topics of conversation as always were all over the place – questions about where I come from, how I live. They all wanted to come and visit me in New York until I told them I live on the 16th floor.....most didn’t think they could even visit, let alone sleep, in a building that high above the ground.

One of the questions they asked me was how I found the village, and how I thought they had changed since they got here. (They hear from people all the time how much they have “changed”). The answer to the first question relates to the physical development of the place, and it seems trite to say that it is a miracle to see what Agahozo-Shalom looks like today. As you drive in the gates are painted in bright colors and adorned with one of our core motto’s....in both English and Kinyarwanda: If you see far, you will go far. Planted on each side of the gate are the traditional trees which were planted outside the traditional Kings Palace in the old days. Our drive to the community center is lined with saplings which will one day be beautiful trees. As you drive in you see an enormous mural painted in front of the Edmond J. Safra Community Center. It is so bright and cheerful, containing many



Edmond J. Safra Community Center

aspects of village life, Rwandan culture – the past, the present and the road to the future. Rather than describe it in detail, which cannot do it justice, please check out the picture! As you stand at the Community Center you can look up and see the school building, with young coffee trees planted on the hillside and a beautiful stone semi-circle in front from which the school and Rwandan flags fly. Looking down you see the astonishing sports fields – a regulation size soccer pitch which is beginning to look lusciously green, next to which are the volleyball courts and basketball courts. Recent visitors from Tufts University made building spectator seating into the hillside their project, and it really completes an already extraordinary picture. Looking across you see the almost toy like houses, painted in their beautiful colors, interspersed with green grass. Visitor houses...complete with hot water tanks (I know! I think visitors should take cold showers like the rest of us!) are nearing completion. And then there is the farm, where I spent a few very enjoyable hours watering and weeding on Saturday. Our water is flowing, our water treatment plant is working...all around fresh new growth is bursting through the earth. Our 4 cows, which will soon be 8 thanks to a gift of a cow and a bull each from the owners of FAIR, our construction company, and



BEAR, our architectural firm. The First Lady of Rwanda, Jeannette Kagame, also generously donated a cow when I met with her a few days ago, which brings us to 9...we are really, really getting there.

As amazing as the physical space is – and so much credit for pulling this miracle together goes to Nir Lahav, the interim Director and the amazing ASYV staff, it is the children who are the real story here.

As we chat back and forth only a few of the 16 need translation – from speaking very few words when they arrived they are swiftly becoming conversant. English is still a challenge for many, particularly having to learn in English at school, but seeing how far they have come in such a short time is astounding. The shy, quiet, head hanging almost embarrassed looking teenagers who arrived here in December are gone. They are replaced with polite but confident young people, who have begun talking about their dreams and “seeing far”.



Agahozo-Shalom Entrance Gate

scientists, lawyers and politicians. But they are concerned about what I want from them, how they can be a “success” in my eyes. When I tell them all I want is for them to be able to be happy – get married, have kids, support their families – and understand how important it is to give back to their community they nod sagely, but I can tell in their eyes that they don’t really believe it. Yet. We talked about their first day here – what they thought when they arrived and they confirmed what we already knew....they thought we had been lying to them, that what we were saying couldn’t possibly be true, but now they see that we meant every word. They talk about how they will make it easier for the next class, how they will guide them and help them to learn the “village way”. I have heard many stories during this week of how our children are already impacting their communities of origin. One young man has a mother who has been constantly abused and taken advantage of by his uncles and they have taken over the land that once belonged to his father. Before going home

the last time he came to his counselors and told them he had been thinking about the situation and he now knew what to do about it. He went to the local authorities and told them what had been going on, and got protection for his mother. Another young man taught the family he lives with the value of “time management” (a big part of life here at the village) and he put the family on a schedule. He also organized the family farm plot into organized rows with weeding and watering schedules...just as he has seen done on the farm at Agahozo-Shalom. The stories are countless, heartwarming and truly inspiring. I don’t want to paint too rosy a picture. These kids face incredible challenges, both due to the trauma that is barely beneath the surface, and to the realities of their lives. Even the gift of school is a challenge – learning physics and chemistry in English, having to do power point presentations when you have never heard the language or seen a computer until 6 months ago? Some have adapted far more easily than others...as is expected we have those who fly, and those who are finding all the new demands made upon them difficult, but they are really trying. We all know this is just the beginning. For many it will take a while and it will be an uphill battle to achieve their dreams. But there is no doubt we are off to a flying start.



One word about the children who have mothers, because we have 25 at the village who do – the others are all orphans of both parents. The international definition of orphans includes those who have lost only one parent, and although at ASYV our focus is on those who are orphans of both, it was decided that the conditions in which these children live nevertheless warrant their being included in the ASYV family.

I need to head to a meeting and so I will end it here. I hate to leave my “porch”...my little spot overlooking the valley, next to the brush from which countless birds are chirping their morning songs, with the cows mooing in the distance....as I close my eyes and feel the gentle breeze...I breathe deep....it feels like paradise.