

## A Day of Hope in Rwanda



*Photo By American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee*

By Steve Lipman

From a hilltop in eastern Rwanda, an hour from Kigali, you can see Lake Mugesera and rolling countryside in every direction.

Atop the hill, where 200 families tended small plots of corn and beans and bananas, young residents of the African country can see a bright future.

The Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village was dedicated there recently, a nonsectarian project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Patterned after Israel's Yemin Orde Youth Village — also located on a scenic hilltop, a haven to orphans from the Holocaust — the Rwandan residential community (agahozo-shalom.org) is home to 125 teens, most of whom lost their parents in the country's 1994 genocide.

On a sunny day, a crowd of local officials, Israeli volunteers and American supporters of the JDC took part in the dedication that featured dances and poetry, tours and speeches, all done by the village's boys and girls.

"Tremendous joy, tremendous excitement," says Will Recant, JDC assistant executive vice president. Agahozo is the Kinyarwanda word for "a place where tears are dried."

Some of the residents, below, gather at the entrance to one of the village's buildings, and others, above, walk along a village road.

A report on the village and a reception for Eugene-Richard Gasana, Rwanda's ambassador to the UN, was held recently at the Manhattan office of Liquidnet Holdings, a corporate sponsor of the project. Conceived by South African-born philanthropist Anne Heyman, the 143-acre, tuition-free campus, purchased from the area's tenant farmers, holds 32 group homes, a high school, a dining hall, science and computer labs, land for organic farming, a reforestation program, counseling and medical facilities, the Edmond J. Safra Community Center and recreational fields. Offering academic and vocational training, it will eventually house 500 Rwandans.

The Joint plans to turn administration of the village over to local leadership, Recant says.

“I feel it’s like a miracle come to the village,” says Marcel, one of the young residents — the village’s language of instruction is English. “I was a street child living on the streets. Now I have hope for my life.”