



ARRIVAL DAY

December 21, 2009

By: Anne Heyman, Founder

I awoke this morning feeling as though this would be the most wonderful day in the world. The unimaginable was about to happen – year 2 of Agahozo-Shalom begins. Over a cup of coffee this feeling was reaffirmed. I was told that our first child – a girl – had shown up at the gates at 7:00am. She came from a town that was approximately a 3 hours walk away, which meant she had risen with the sun and hit the road the minute there was light. And she came carrying nothing. The feeling was overwhelming when I heard that; it was overwhelming at least a dozen times during the day. The kids seem so young (mostly 16 and 17; a few 15 year olds). I know their stories. I can't imagine what they have been through.

When the kids arrived their big brothers and sisters from last year gave them and their guardians a tour. At 1:30 we began the official welcome. I was sitting with two "guardians" who had brought children.....one of whom had taken in a street girl, and she was the girl he brought today. He asked to speak to me for a moment and in very good English (he is a young man of only 20) he said how he despaired for how he could take care of her and we answered his prayers. He was very eloquent – and so very grateful. The woman next to me couldn't stop crying....from the first welcome, which was done by one of the grade coordinators, through the speech of the Head of Informal Education. The young man who wrote the poem for me which is framed in my office spoke on behalf of the "older brothers and sisters". He spoke in both Kinyarwanda and in English.....he was amazing. He is completely coming out of his shell, and he has grown a foot since he came to the village – I kid you not! Then one of the big sisters...who has the most amazing voice....sang a song which of course was all about having family and brothers and sisters and how Agahozo-Shalom is home...etc. etc. I was being given a line by line translation but it wasn't necessary. The tone conveyed the content, and the tears of all around me spoke volumes. I could not stop the tears from just streaming down my face. At one point one of the guardians said to me "why are you crying?" He just couldn't figure it out. After the speeches we had snacks – samosas and homemade potato chips. And of course peanuts. I have to tell you that a meal does not get better than that, but of course it was all gone in about 10 minutes. I think as much food as you make these kids will eat – although they did bring along their "guardians" who I am sure those who accompanied them appreciated the free delicious food as well.

After this we went down to the football field where the sun was so hot – I don't think I have ever felt such hot weather for 2 days straight in Rwanda....and we are in the middle of the rainy season! We went through essentially the same procedure as last year. The head house mother called out the number of the house and the name of the housemother, the counselor and the assigned volunteer, all of whom came forward. She then called the name of each child in that house (16 per house). As each child came forward everyone clapped. The hugs from the house moms, and slaps from the counselors and the ear to ear grins of the volunteers spoke volumes. It was a long time in the hot sun.....but it was totally worth every minute. As I watched the kids coming up I couldn't help but think of their stories - the child whose father killed his mother then himself; the girl who lived with a sister who got married and the new husband started to abuse her so she ran away, the child who works a regular construction job in order to put himself through school.....and

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on, and on and on. And then when you see those faces, some of them so small, so young. The impact of seeing them and putting them together with their story....you just want to go over and give them a big hug. How amazing that we are able to change people's lives in this way. After the ceremony the kids went with their "families" to their new homes. They showed their guardians where they were to live, and then the guardians left the village. Some "family time" followed, and I didn't see them again until dinner.