



Hello again from the beautiful hills of the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village. Today was the end of the first week of training for the staff and volunteers at Agahozo-Shalom. It was also the first day of strategic planning meetings for the entire management committee, all of whom are in the village together which is a rare occasion. Other than the staff the village is strangely empty, most of the first class having gone to friends or relatives for the holiday period. It is a bit sad for me not having those laughing smiling faces to greet me everywhere I go. Their singing is really missed, as are the normal sounds of the village - the rhythm of life that has been so wonderfully restored. There are a half dozen kids in the village all of whom had nowhere to go, and they are very busy helping to prepare for the new class of children who will arrive in the village on December 21<sup>st</sup>. They are so excited to be getting new “brothers and sisters”, and in fact the excitement in the village is building as thoughts turn to the planning sessions for next week, the additional trainings and the final preparation for the big arrival day.

It is incredible to think that this time last year we had just welcomed our first 125 kids. I recall that day so vividly, turning to Sifa as the first bus loads began to arrive and saying “125 at one time? what were we thinking?” It was overwhelming in some ways, particularly since neither we, nor they, nor our completely new and novice staff and volunteers had any idea of what to expect. What a difference a year makes! Our “old” kids are, as a whole, absolutely blossoming. Certainly there are those who have “issues”, but whether academically or with regards to their physical or mental health, they are getting the attention they need and we truly see progress on all fronts. I haven’t really allowed myself to think about our new arrivals too much. I have read their profiles, and it is hard not to be astonished at the absolute misery and really difficult circumstances that so many of them have been exposed to. I expect that they will arrive much as the first group did, with eyes downcast, a little afraid, not quite knowing what to expect. Even after they see the beautiful village they will not quite understand how they got to be here and whether the opportunities they are being told about are real. This group has a distinct advantage however, over last year’s group – they have big brothers and sisters to mentor and guide them, to answer their questions, to be there as role models and for support. (It took our first class of kids at least three months to really settle down at the village; it was not until after they had left for their first vacation period and came back to welcoming arms that they realized that we meant it when we said that this was now their home, and it wasn’t going to go away).

The staff being trained in the village includes a new cohort of house mothers and counselors as well as support staff; it also includes 10 volunteers who are going to be at the village for one year each in various capacities. It is astonishing to think that in 2010 there will be 350 people living in the village full time. All of the houses are occupied (some by staff, some by the learning centers, library, art and music centers, and administration offices). This puts a lot of pressure



on the village to launch a capital campaign at a time when we are struggling to meet our operational budget. However, if we don't build enough to vacate at least 8 of these homes next year, we won't be able to welcome another 125 children next December. Essentially we need to build a learning center (which would house the art and music centers and the administrative offices) as well as a Health and Wellness Center. The total cost of building will be around \$800,000. Know anyone who is feeling generous and would like to give a big boost to our capital campaign? Speaking of which, if you haven't seen the video on the donate page (<http://www.asyv.org/donate.html>) yet please go check it out...you will be glad you did!

With all the houses full we have started to use the newly opened guest accommodations (which actually have hot water....I feel a little guilty as the rest of the Village has to make do with cold showers....but I have to admit that I am a really big fan of hot water. One more thing to be grateful for in this amazing world of ours. I hope you will hear from different members of our management team over the next few days, a couple of whom are "first timers" at the Village and should have very interesting first impressions. You can be sure you will be hearing from me again.