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It takes just under an hour to drive from Kigali to ASYV, a lot shorter than it used to take since the government improved the road leading from the main road into the Village. This is something Anne and the rest of the staff have been working on for a long time and what a difference!

Driving through the colorful gates brought back such memories from when I had last been here, a year and a half ago, during the final construction phase. I had come with my mother-in-law, Judy, and at that time, the majority of the houses were nearly complete, the dining hall and the school were about halfway complete, and we ceremoniously planted tiny little saplings at the entranceway. But the two hills on which ASYV sits were brown and dusty and yearning for attention.

Now, I was struck by the explosions of color here. The little saplings were little trees! The hills were green with new grasses and plantings, the buildings were painted with dramatic murals from last year's first class of students, and the farm at the base of the hills was alive with activity. It was an amazing sight and I was so proud to be bringing my husband, Emanuel, and our three daughters to experience the successful process and product that ASYV embodies. They've witnessed the attention and passion I have paid to it at home, and now they would see just how incredible this environment would be for the kids.

We were arriving on a very important evening. The staff and volunteers were preparing for the arrival of only the second class of students the next day. 125 orphaned teenagers would be arriving from all over the country to become a part of this family -- to be nurtured by loving housemothers, to be educationally stimulated by teachers trained in innovative educational techniques, and to be emotionally healed and supported by a knowledgeable group of staff members and volunteers throughout each of their days.

Our time was limited at the Village (we were leaving the following evening) but we had many special moments. The initial tour, led by the passionate Nir, the interim director from Israel, took us through the new gardens of vegetables, fruit trees and coffee plants. We met two new cows, who gave my daughter wet kisses. We admired the nearly complete outdoor amphitheater, so efficient with its underground drainage system. We dined in the cavernous hall and imagined it filled with 600 people someday...and we contemplated acoustical panels! We walked through classrooms and bedrooms and music rooms and art rooms and we really tried to imagine what it would be like to be one of the kids here.



But when we saw the kids arriving the next morning, we knew that we could never really imagine what it's like to be in their shoes. The first child arrived with nothing BUT her

shoes and the clothes she was wearing...and she had walked for three hours to get there. It was a very emotional day. By the end of it, the kids had been given tours, had been given a delicious snack (of samosas from the marvelous kitchen staff and of bananas we had purchased in the market that morning), and had listened to presentations by the directors and a few of the students from last year. Most dramatically, everyone had sat in the outdoor bleachers on the basketball court while each student was called up by name and introduced to their new home and housemother. Each student was applauded and greeted with warm, loving hugs. Shy smiles, big smiles, slow shuffles, big leaps, cautious leans, energetic enveloping arms – everyone is different, here too. And this is a place where each of them will find their place and their family.

I loved coming back here (I didn't love the 48 hours it took to get here but...) and I LOVED bringing my family to see ASYV and to see how unique it is and how incredible this country is. My oldest daughter, Josie, is celebrating her bat mitzvah this week. She has asked that people contribute to a fund we set up for her to donate to ASYV, and she spent some time last year raising money herself for ASYV. It was a gift to me to be able to watch her meet some of these kids, and to experience how they would be living here. She wrote a little of her experience, too, so please look for her blog.