



Tuesday April 20, 2010 – Blog Entry

It is wonderful to be back in the Village again (despite having to traipse around with my broken ankle). The rainy season has made things green and lush and while Rwanda is always beautiful the fresh greenery and the after rain smells, the chirping of the amazing colorful birds and the extraordinary scenery allow you to just breathe deep. While mourning and remembering Philbert have been a big part of this visit (will post something about this at a later date) the amazing stories and experiences just keep coming. This afternoon I spent some time with the Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World) Committee. For those of you who don't know, part of Agahozo-Shalom's philosophy of repair and healing is that all children living in the village must be engaged in a project in which they do something for others. After reviewing what had been done last term with the Committee (made up of a house mother, grade coordinator, volunteer and 4 counselors) I set out with the committee to visit the various projects that our first year of kids (Senior 4) had been working on.

The kids work every Tuesday afternoon in one of three places: the primary school, the local medical clinic, or social services.

Our first stop was at the primary school in Rubona. Of course as we left the Village it started the daily rain shower – although that hardly seems like a fitting description. It is the rainy season and around the same time every afternoon the sky just seems to dump a ton of water for about an hour....then the sun comes out and it is life as usual. The school is what you would imagine – simple brick structures, bare class rooms with a blackboard and a few simple desks. Many of the children in school uniforms – not always the cleanest - with no shoes; one sweet looking girl was not only not in uniform but wearing what once must have been a beautiful “princess” dress. Really beautiful kids, and very happy to have a visit from a “muzunga” – actually there were two of us as one of the volunteers is part of the Tikkun Olam team and joined on the visit. We met with the principal and the English teacher, with whom the Agahozo-Shalom kids work every afternoon teaching primary 4 kids English, tutoring them and helping out. The school was obviously pleased to have assistance from the Agahozo-Shalom kids and when asked if there was anything more we could do or anything we could do better the answer was twofold: the teachers, who are now required to teach in English, don't have the best English skills and could use help – we were asked if Agahozo-Shalom could help the teachers with English. The other thing that was needed was “supplies”. When I asked what kind of supplies they needed, the teacher very sorrowfully said that most of the kids don't have pen and paper, and its very hard to teach them this way. Can you imagine...kids who go to school and want to learn and don't have a notebook or a pencil. It just breaks your heart.

The next stop on our tour was the local medical clinic. It is completely amazing what our kids have done here. I haven't been to the clinic in a very long time and WOW....what a difference! When the clinic said it could use assistance our kids were told they would be filing/organizing papers etc. When they arrived at the clinic for their first day of work they told the workers there that the clinic was not clean and therefore not hygienic, and so this would be their first job. They have done an



AMAZING job of scrubbing that clinic down, and it felt clean when we went to visit it today, even though the kids have been away for 3 weeks – they are now maintaining it as they should! There is a “maternity ward” at the clinic – a room where mothers from the neighborhood come to give birth. I was told that when our kids arrived it was filthy and smelly and you could hardly go in there. The kids apparently scrubbed it down, even washing the mosquito nets. Today it was certainly not much to look at – a bunch of metal cots with about ½ dozen very unhappy looking women strewn on some of the beds – but it was clean! We got the bonus of seeing a baby that couldn’t have been more than a couple of days old...so teeny...and fragile. The staff told us that the kids did not only clean up the place but they also “beautified” it. They put up and painted a suggestion box, they made homemade notice boards (from cardboard boxes which they painted) and took all the notices that were taped to the walls and put them neatly on the notice boards. They have also started working in the garden and cleaning up the grounds. Again we asked what more we can do and how else we can help, the answer was with lessons on nutrition for the patients, perhaps starting a vegetable garden at the hospital and a few other very doable suggestions.

Next was the social service work being done, and from the clinic we drove to a point where we had to leave the car and walk down one of the many rural pathways that are the streets of Rwanda. After walking for about 10 minutes (which in my boot with my broken ankle was not without pain) we finally arrived at a mud house that had a white wooden door. One of the counselors was explaining to us the project: This house, which is made of mud as are many of the homes in this part of Rwanda, had been falling apart. There were holes in the walls where mud was falling off; there was no door and the wind whipped through the house where a woman lived with her son. Right outside the hole in the wall that served as a front door was a large tree, making it difficult to get in and out of the house. Our kids assessed the situation and began by digging the tree up to allow a little breathing room at the door. They nailed a bunch of planks together and made a door which they attached. They then added another layer of mud to the house to make it stronger and more stable. They are still going to add one more layer. As we were getting this explanation the women who own the house came over and told us that she was freezing at night and she didn’t know what to do because the walls were beginning to fall down. This woman, who spends her days with her son scrounging for food (they have no land on which to grow anything) – they literally live day by day, eating only when they can find something to eat – was so grateful for the roof over her head. (Can you imagine in the pouring rains of the rainy season not having a solid roof over your head?) We continued down the road for another 10 minutes or so – at this point the sun was going down and the mosquitoes were everywhere....don’t forget those malaria pills – and we came to another social service project: Our Agahozo-Shalom kids had gone to help an elderly man (52) who lived in....you can’t even say it was a tin shack because it wasn’t that big. Really a teeny tin hovel which was just big enough to cover his body. The kids planted a field of beans and corn for him, but they couldn’t bear to see him live like this. He has some kind of shaking disease, probably Parkinson’s. The kids decided that they were going to build him a house, which they did and did a really amazing job (they simply built a traditional mud house over the existing structure). When we arrived today the man was lying in the little hovel curled up in a little ball. Some of the team got him out, and he told us he hadn’t eaten for a week. One of our



housemothers immediately ran off to get him milk, but he told us that he wouldn't be able to keep it down. We decided that we would return later with food for him, and work out a plan for our kids to continue to visit, check up on him, and see that he gets some food.

For 4 years now I have been telling people that when the children of Agahozo-Shalom leave the village they will change their community, and in all likelihood, the world. It is amazing how after 1 year and 3 months with us these kids are already changing the world. They are affecting lives in the most meaningful ways, and they are only getting started. I could not be more proud of them.