

# Rwanda rw'ejo and the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village

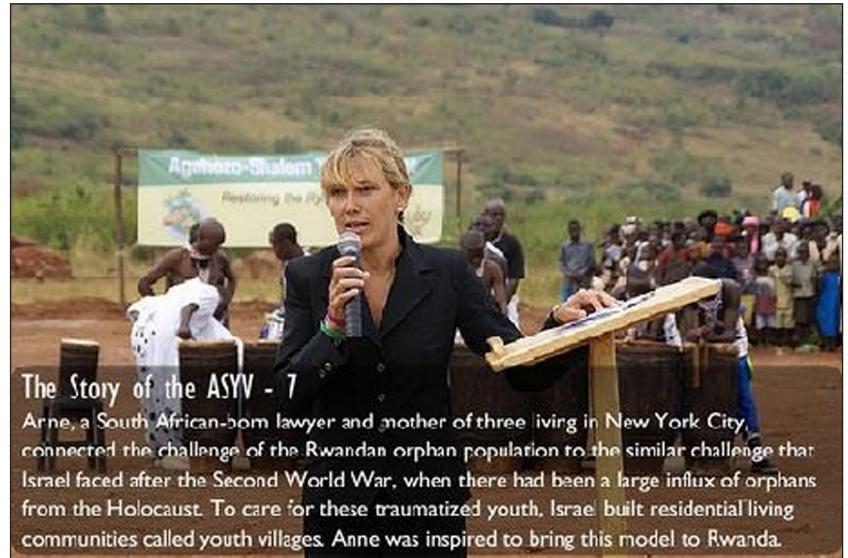
BY PATRICK KARURETWA

To anyone who witnessed the tragic events that devastated Rwanda in 1994, it was evident that the impact would be massive. It was also clear that the wounds would take a long time to heal. Very few, however, could have anticipated that the small nation would embark on such a unique journey to rebuild itself.

For the last 16 years, the men and women of Rwanda have been working tirelessly to write a new chapter in their story. As one author noted: 'Rwandans rebelled against their fate'.

Whilst analyzing Rwanda's surprising post-war achievements, various observers choose to focus on different aspects. Some of the 'experts' whose predictions and theories have been consistently challenged by the facts on the ground have been painstakingly highlighting every single failure, real or imagined. Rather than rethinking their views and adjusting their theories, they choose to disparage anything that is contradictory. With astounding zeal, they have been trying to force the facts to fit the theory. For them, Rwanda's prospects remain bleak.

I disagree. Like many other observers who care more about Rwandans than winning arguments, I cannot fail to notice the increasing number of



positive signs that point towards unexpected but real outcomes. When a historically deprived nation faces total disintegration but emerges, less than two decades later, as a regional model in areas as critical and wide-ranging as primary education (girls and boys), women empowerment, GDP growth rate, healthcare, anti-corruption, environmental policies, contribution to peacekeeping etc., I find it hard not to be optimistic.

There is, however, another sign that is not frequently mentioned; Rwanda's remarkable ability to attract exceptional people from all over the world. One such person is Anne Heyman. In the fall of 2005, this mother of three from New York City heard about one of the challenges faced by post-genocide Rwanda; the huge number of orphans left by the genocide. As a Jew, Anne recalled how, faced with similar challenges in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the people of Israel devised a unique strategy to deal with the profound trauma

and the need to redefine the future of vulnerable children. So she went to Israel and put together a group of people with some experience in the post World War II youth villages. Together they traveled to Rwanda and, like all well-meaning people from various corners of the world, they were warmly welcomed.

For Rwandans have long believed that there could be no viable future without sound investment in the nation's greatest resource; its own people. With the support of local organizations, individuals and the know-how from Israeli and American experts, Anne created the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village (ASYV) which replicated some of the aspects of the Israeli Yemin Orde Youth Village, but adapted the model to suit Rwanda's realities, culture and priorities.

Less than 5 years later, the ASYV shares a distinctive feature with several other initiatives in post-genocide Rwanda; it has succeeded beyond expectations.

# Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village

*Nureba Kure Uzagera Kure (If you look far, you will get far)*

These few words written on a wall in the village by the members of the Agahozo community perfectly capture the essence of what is happening inside that beautiful site in Rwamagana. 250 young Rwandan orphans are growing up in an enriching environment that replicates the rhythm of family life and provides them with the tools and positive mindset they need to forge their own futures.

The ASYV's formal and informal pedagogic approach which was developed in conjunction with, among others, the world renowned, Jerusalem-based International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential (ICELP), is specifically designed to shape ambitious personalities with a strong sense of community and responsibility. From the onset, however, Anne Heyman and her partners understood that Rwandan ownership of the project was paramount. The self-sustaining project has been encouraged and assisted by Rwandans from a vast array of professions.

The current 250 orphans will eventually be joined by 250 others to fill the village's 500 spots. Upon graduation, the first intake will be replaced by another group of vulnerable youths. More bright futures will be shaped. More young Rwandans will be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to realize their potential as individuals and to become upstanding and contributing members of their society, helping to build a stronger Rwanda.

Some of us remember the times when many of those children and their parents had no place in Rwanda. Today, all of them represent the new Rwanda. Each one of these boys and girls is part of the vision of a united, prosperous and strong Rwanda.

This year, the Rwanda Convention Association (RCA 2010) in North America will

be held in Boston MA. Like every year, Rwandans and Friends of Rwanda will be recognized for their outstanding contributions to the development of Rwanda. I will be voting for Anne Heyman for the RCA 'Humanitarian Award' and Taylor Krauss of Voices of Rwanda for the 'Friend of Rwanda Award'. I hope that many readers who share this vision of Rwanda will join me in recognizing their contributions toward its achievement.

***The author is a Rwandan graduate student at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University***

