

## NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2008

I got a call from a Japanese friend recently who said, "Where have you been? What is going on?" and little alarm bells went off in my head...time for a newsletter!

Upon reflection, we have come very far – and we have some big challenges remaining before we can do the work of running a secondary school here in Rwanda. Our current scenario is that we have the land, we have the building team, we have a plan, we have a library and we have bookshelves and chairs and desks and we are beginning the teacher hiring process – but we don't have a building! But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself --

Some snapshots:

-In February, thirty-six more boxes of books arrived. Visiting math professor Elaine Kasimatis and I were allowed back in the inner sanctum of the postal storage area because they know us so well now. It was exciting to unpack: we now have enough math, science and social studies textbooks to start our first year and we are looking for English and French texts from local publishers.

-I walked into our "library" (my husband's office stacked with books) one day to find volunteer Cole McConnell engrossed in a book, with a stack of library reference books next to her. "The trouble with this job is not getting sucked into reading!" she said. It really is tantalizing, but Cole persevered and she catalogued and made tracings for all the 2000+ books we have, a process which demands a very organized mind and an attention to detail that all of us will be indebted to for years to come. This library -- including both new and used books -- is a real blessing in a country where most schools are lucky if they have 100 books in the whole school. A prospective teacher for our school walked into the office and stopped dead in his tracks and exclaimed, "Books! Oh my God!" (It told me that he was a candidate I should consider.) We now have an excellent selection of children's literature, young adult fiction, some very good social studies, science and math textbooks, and a good cross-section of history books. Given our focus on sustainability, we now hope to improve our selection of "green technology" – books on solar power, biogas systems, erosion control, wind generation, alternative building, green housing, etc. See our wishlist on our website or email me if you'd like to suggest or provide books for us!

-One of my former students from the English class in Rwamagana directs a dance and culture troupe and in February, they performed for my parents and Elaine and her daughter Katja. They were polished and talented and energetic, and afterwards, Katja, an accomplished ballerina, spent some time learning some steps from them and demonstrating a little ballet on point! It reminded me that a big favor we can do for young (and old) people is to find those windows into other cultures that show us how rich the world is with variety. Elaine and Katja have committed to stay in Rwanda for a year and their energy, sense of adventure and endurance in the face of many challenges (among them a mosque with a loudspeaker next door that awakens them at 4:40 every morning) are a real gift to us. Elaine's 25 years of teacher training experience is absolutely invaluable, as you'll read below.

- In May, Elaine and I were moved by comments teachers wrote after we conducted a 10-hour workshop for teachers called "Assessment for Learning: How Do You Know What Your Students Really Know?" Teachers at UNATEK, a university in Eastern Province, attend classes part-time to get training while they are on the job and their comments indicated how hungry they were for innovative methods that many American educators take for granted.

"Something I want to use in my class is thanking / appreciating students' answers in order to make them feel safe in the classroom."

"I want to use this way of allowing the student to be involved in his lessons and to be able to turn around [in his seat]"

"It was helpful to me to learn that you can use the group in teaching without forgetting the single individual."

Almost all participants remarked on their enthusiasm about dividing students into small groups and one teacher said, "Thank you for all you have done for us. Training us is also training the whole country because we will be happy to share with other teachers."

In the 1960's, Rwanda, like many African nations, was in the middle of an independence struggle and successive governments didn't have or allocate resources for updating teacher training from the colonial system – a system that still often emphasizes authority and the success of a few elite at the expense of the many who will fail exams and be relegated to inferior programs. A teacher faced with 50 or 70 students needs more pedagogical techniques and resources to be successful but teacher training is often one of the last programs to receive attention. Indeed, teachers here are incredibly dedicated and undercompensated people who have found many ways to cope with lack of supplies, large classes, needy students and their own difficulties in getting information. We plan to do more training in July – partly as a way to contribute to capacity-building in Rwanda and partly to recruit two to three teachers for our program. We're very excited that Deborah Otto, a regional field director with Expeditionary Learning, is coming to Rwanda on her vacation time to assist us with training and school planning!

-In early May, we also sat down with our building team to look at our design for a two-story eight-room building. The land surveyed, the fence-post holes dug, the first loads of sand and aggregate delivered, we toured a dozen other sites – schools, a prison using biogas, an organic farm with livestock, the brick factory – to make plans for our first building. We made some tough choices: roof tiles cost more but a tin roof in a rainstorm is so deafening that a whole church choir can't be heard (I know!). Two stories cost more than one but the size of our plot demands that we steward our square meters carefully. 12 mm steel rods are stronger than 8mm – a consideration in an earthquake zone. So we have a design for a building which is solid and suited to our needs but not extravagant or luxurious (no plumbing, for example – we'll have outdoor latrines)...but building costs have increased. Instead of the \$350 - \$400,000 pricetag I was expecting, the estimate was \$670,000. We have a very trustworthy building team, so we know we are getting the straight story, but among other things, we have to buy some of our own heavy equipment because over time, it is cheaper for us to buy (and rent it out to others) than to rent it repeatedly ourselves. And as all of you know, fuel prices have increased, which has hit Rwanda harder than the USA.

So now we take a step back and consider the Expeditionary Learning philosophy: "education is an expedition into the unknown." One story we can reflect on is that of Steven Levy who teaches fourth grade at an EL school in Lexington, MA (USA). His fourth graders entered a completely empty classroom one September and said, "Hey, where is all our stuff?" and he responded, "What do you need?" They spent the next several months writing letters, measuring wood, learning carpentry, calculating lumber feet, learning about stock and investment and learning about early American settlers and how they started out, picking up impressive writing, math and problem-solving skills and self-confidence and cooperation along the way.

So...maybe we select a small group of some older returning students – teens and young adults – and say, "What do you need to build a school?" Bricks? Straw bales? Rammed earth? Recycled tires? Expertise? English? Math? Cooperation? One tenet of EL says that we do things that we don't expect we will be able to do. In 1994 and 1995, the people who came back to (or stayed in) Rwanda to pick up the pieces of the

ruins that were left after the genocide showed incredible determination to build something from seemingly nothing. They persevered even when many of them said "we thought we could never be a country again." Today people are coming from other African nations to Rwanda to see how – how to build biogas digesters, how to keep towns clean, how to decrease the incidence of AIDS, how to boost community development and how to build human capacity.

Now, I'd like to ask you to join us! No matter what shape our school takes or what direction we go, we students and teachers are going to work hard and we will also need your help to make it happen. Would you like to scholarship one of our students? Share expertise? Sponsor a classroom? Make a donation that will help buy textbooks or chairs or notebooks? Check our website in the next few days at [www.rwandaschoolproject.org](http://www.rwandaschoolproject.org) and see some pictures of what is happening!



Happy Fourth of July – Independence Day for the USA and Liberation Day for Rwanda.

All the best,

Robin Strickler