

February 2009

Jerold and I left Saskatoon on December 28, 2008 and returned home on January 14, 2009. Quite the adjustments FROM cold, year 2008, day-after-Christmas, comforts and luxuries abounding with 2 cars, curling irons, pantries and fridges overflowing, clean and free cold and hot water available on demand, bathrooms and facilities everywhere (I could go on and on) TO... no car (although negotiable taxis: motorcycle taxis and buses are available for 7,000 Rwandan francs, which sounded like a lot to pay, but was it? – I didn't know either), bathroom facilities well planned in advance since 2 km. or 5 hrs. is not an exaggeration from point A to B, but B might be closed so don't rule out point C, probably at the bottom of another huge incline or descent (did you know that Rwanda is called the "Land of a Thousand Hills", mountains would be more accurate), and – most importantly – no plug-in for my curling iron. But then, this trip was not about me! Oh, and did I mention arriving in pleasant 25 degree weather, hardly any rain, lush vegetation everywhere, beautiful big eyes and smiles that responded to attention and any effort to communicate, avocados, pineapple, mangos, bananas in abundance. And that was all in the first day!

We had adopted Denis as a son when he stayed with us, and then to meet his wife Dativa was to fall in love instantly with a 'daughter' that is beautiful inside and out. The final bonus was that she was born the same year as our daughter Candace, and while we were in Africa we celebrated Dativa's birthday with her – the first time she had ever had a birthday party, complete with pizza and candles. She was the one that mothered me during our time together – holding my hand when we crossed the busy streets or when the slopes were too steep for me to maneuver at first, doing any bartering for me in the African way, showing me by example how to reach out to the poor and/or needy (the women in particular who have such hard lives in many cases), making sure I was feeling safe and warm (they often wear shawls and long sleeves in the evening because it's 'cold!'). The good thing about being in Kigali during the Christmas break was that I got to spend a lot of time with Dativa, and see just how hard she works and how unselfish and giving she is. When I suggested how electricity would make caring for their household of 12 so much easier with refrigeration and a stove, etc. she immediately took me to one of the classrooms that is an extension of their house to show me how dark that room gets when it is cloudy or rainy and it made it difficult for the teachers and children – that's why she would like electricity. Without a doubt she is Denis' right-hand (wo)man and gives such credibility to our funding efforts. She is in charge of a project they are calling "The Good Samaritan Project", which involves buying rice, beans, oil, salt, sugar, and perhaps flour in bulk and distributing them to very poor and needy families – and she knows many. With \$100 in hand we went to a market and bought enough to feed about 8 households for a week. It was amazing and humbling to help her distribute those basics and see their appreciation. Some of these same families were recipients of the Dawg shoes that we took over, and it was fun to see them choose a suitable size and style – and bright color, and then leave wearing them and a big smile.

And then there were the children! We were able to enjoy immensely the Mugabo kids and celebrate the eldest daughter's 9th birthday with them – complete with chocolate swirl ice cream, another very rare treat for them. They have four daughters ages 3 – 9, two adopted boys ages 5 and 6 approx., and another 17 yr. old sister of one of the boys. They are so appreciative of anything they receive – and one of my highlights (another one...) was to see the little boys wearing my grandsons' last summer's pyjamas to church on Sunday morning – little t-shirt and jersey shorts with dinosaurs. All the clothing I personally took in my own bags for distributing were visible on somebody during my time there. A lot more items of clothing are waiting to be sent, stuffed in with the remaining 4 boxes of Dawg shoes that we will be

sending shortly. Although we got a wonderful rate (about \$250/box – 80% off regular shipping costs) via a local company and sending by air, we are spreading out the expense of it a bit as we prioritize the funds for the various commitments and necessities.

I would have to say that one of the most fulfilling days was the day we went to Burema, a small village about 30 minutes by taxi out of Kigali where the sewing school has been operating for about 3 months. Denis did some renovation on a building he has owned in that village for a few years and had given to widows to live in. They have not been displaced, but the middle section of the building, which is about 30 ft. long and 12 ft. wide, is the new home of the Peace Academy Training Center (they seem to like to give everything a title and a name in Africa). Six treadle sewing machines have been bought (\$150 each) and a local teacher hired (\$100/month). A groundsman/night security/caretaker by the name of James lives in a small room at the side and is paid a very modest fee of \$60/month. There are 22 young women enrolled in the sewing classes and being taught English as well by James. The young women are ages 13 to 22, and 3 of them have babies who are either on their mother's back or in a little room off to the side. There is no electricity, of course, and it is amazing to see how well they have done with sharing the 6 sewing machines and having very limited natural light. There was an official ribbon-cutting ceremony that day, they put on a little program with lots of singing and dancing, they had their projects on display and for sale (two square cloths on which they had learned various hand stitches, crocheting, embroidering and needlework, one baby outfit with a collar, set-in sleeves, elastic in the waist and legs of the bloomer bottoms), and then they each sewed their own uniform which consisted of a blouse and straight skirt. That is very impressive for such a short period of time. Another girl and I bought all the items they had for sale so that they could then buy more material and items for future projects. This is so very exciting to realize this is their key to changing their future forever as they support themselves and their families. My dream is to set each of these girls up with the basics upon completion of the program, but the details are still being worked on and will be following, as I work out the 'adoption/sponsorship' idea. I am very enthused about this!

Unfortunately, I only got to observe the children's school in session for one day because of the holiday break, but it was such a delight, and those kids are so adorable! The teachers are enthusiastic and the kids are so respectful and happy to be learning. The 'climb' to the front door of the school/house is amazing and those little people are like mountain goats. I measured some of the steps, carved out of rock, and many are 18 inches high – but they don't even notice.

I will go back, God willing, and renew the many friendships that have begun – and as they learn more English it will be great to communicate at a deeper level than hugs, smiles, and gestures! I never did get to the Akagera National Park (only about 2 hrs. away) to see giraffes, hippos, zebras, monkeys, etc., nor to see the gorillas (about \$500 away, so probably won't ever get that in), or even the genocide memorial sites, but the visit this time was about so much more.

I feel very humbled to have been able to experience another part of God's creation, so different from ours in some ways, and yet so similar. We have so much to learn from them – their hospitality and warmth with every last thing they might have, their contentment and belief that 'it's okay', their faith and hope that God will provide and protect, their continual effort to forgive the past and live for now in love and caring for the poor and homeless – and burying the dead. We have just no idea!

This has been one of the best experiences of my life (not the easiest, but probably not the hardest either) and I can only say thank-you to all of you who have shared my passion before I went and my passion now that I'm back, for all who have shown support by gifts of items to take, money, prayer and words of encouragement. With your help, we have made a difference, and this is only the beginning!