



May 2018

Dear friends,

Here we are at edition 3 of our Newsletter and, as you can see, the news that we have changed our name from The Richmond Charitable Trust to DeafReach. This edition is devoted entirely to a reflection of the time our volunteer consultant, HT, spent at Umutara School in Rwanda. We do hope you enjoy reading this wonderful account.

### **Rwanda Story**

The day flight from Brussels, excellent food and friendly people, provided an easy evening entry to Rwanda's capital, Kigali. Entering a new city in darkness usually gives little for the mind to focus on, mixed with the drowsiness and disorientation of flight, and exiting the customs area I scanned the throng for a friendly face.

Standard non-comittal shrugging to an assumed taxi driver was perhaps not what the Reverend Dominique had been expecting. But neither was I what he had been expecting from a British visitor, as he and Pastor Omar later shared with much hilarity. Rwandan warmth and politeness quickly moved us past that faux pas, with a late evening of food, stories and laughter.

The following morning, emerging early from the cavernous hotel, Kigali appeared as a series of hills laid out with clean well-ordered roads. I was surprised by the number of new sleek glass and brick buildings, substantial but somehow friendly, always surrounded by greenery, colour and deep blue sky. The gentle warmth of Rwanda's winter season made walking in the capital a pleasure, threading our way through the busy downtown streets in an atmosphere that felt happy and friendly.

Often referred to as "The land of a thousand hills", Rwanda is a green and undulating landscape of hills and plantations ranging from 1,000 to 4,500m above sea level. Situated in the heart of Central and East Africa, the country is 5 miles south of the equator and covers a total area of 25,313 Sq Km. Bordered by Uganda to the north, Tanzania to the east, Burundi to the south and the

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the west, it is landlocked with the exception of the great body of water of Lake Kivu which forms part of its western border.

Kigali sits in the center of Rwanda while Umutara Deaf School, my destination and home for the next two months, lay in the far north east looking across to the mountain border of Uganda. The school's large and elderly extended 4 x 4 was the perfect vehicle for this journey, with the solidity for off-road work prized by the NGOs there. Sitting high in the front of the vehicle was an excellent introduction to the sweeping landscapes of rural Rwanda.

Known for its great diversity of landscapes, Rwanda has five volcanoes, twenty-three lakes and numerous rivers, some claimed to form the source of the River Nile. Its vegetation ranges from dense equatorial forest in the northwest, through to the Rugezi Wetlands and on to the tropical savannah of the east. The country is home to one third of the world's remaining mountain gorillas, has one third of Africa's bird species and has forty percent of the large mammals species of Africa, with the great animals of the wild protected and able to roam free within the vast national parks.

Three and a half hours of mostly good tarmac roads took us up into Nyagatare District. Many sections of the road were diverted around the huge widening programmes of this north-south border road, under the management of China's huge highways development scheme throughout Asia and Africa, with some sections showing World Bank investment. A final forty minutes of dirt roads that would have totalled a regular car took us to Muvumba Village, and the welcoming gates of Umutara Deaf School.

Rev Dominique's smile split his face as he boomed, "Welcome to Umutara". Few people were around, this being the long December–January school holiday, but there was an air of steady industry, maintenance of buildings, goats herded and cows and chickens being fed. My home for the next two months. Having lived and worked in many developing countries, this was the most remote I had ever been, the heart of Africa, far from the Capital and off the tarmac roads into the beautiful poor rural heartland.

Getting out of the truck in the late evening dusk, a throng of small arms and beaming faces seemed to surround us, all trying to take my hand and help offload the bags and bunches of bananas accumulated on the way. With obvious pride, Dominique introduced his wife Elevanie and each of his four children, three girls and one boy, the youngest, Kezia, making me smile with her impish grin.

Their large mud-brick two-story house was warm and welcoming, with a patio looking across to the twilight-lit hills of the Ugandan border. The kitchen table, groaning with the staple foods of Rwanda, rice, beans, cabbage boiled potatoes, chicken and large chips, was a wonderful Rwandan welcome. After a quite grace, we piled into heaped plates, rapidly refilled, and later on feeling full and peaceful in my own small house around the corner, I dropped into effortless sleep.

The milky dawn light of the early morning reinforced the impression of the night before, of Umutara as a community within a community. The squawking and strutting of chickens was the only sound in the peace of the morning, while across the valley small plumes of smoke indicated the new day and breakfast a-cooking. On the football pitch alongside my house, a herd of 40 goats strolled nonchalantly chewing grass, and a wave to the herder earned me a big grin and friendly wave back.

Offering a few greetings in my rusty sign language, it was good to achieve that first communication in this community. It was clear straightaway that Rwandan sign language was very different from my native sign. But no matter, simply showing willing to engage and a friendly smile is the key to entering any deaf community, and my creaky efforts were always rewarded with warmth and friendliness in the days ahead.

From where I stood on the football pitch, the main body of the school appeared as a rectangle with the school buildings all around the sides with an inner area of grass. Sited on the flat part of the school's two and a half acres of land given by the government, most of these buildings were made from brick, rather than the weaker mud brick of the village houses, denoting a higher quality of build, though of simple construction. Classrooms, halls, dormitories and offices were alike, simple construction and sparsely furnished. At the far end of the rectangle it was good to see a full concrete basketball ground, apparently the best facility of its kind in the district.

New looking large water tanks provided a more sophisticated impression, essential for a residential school in an area of strong drought risk, and had been installed fairly recently through the funding of a Canadian INGO. Beyond the rectangular perimeter of buildings the land was used for growing vegetables for the kitchen, rearing the chickens, goats and cows and the beginnings of bee keeping. Finally on the driveway back out to the village, mud brick buildings indicated the early development of the school's Vocational Training Centre where deaf children who had completed their primary education might go for training in the skills of masonry, hairdressing and tailoring.

Over the next few days, sitting with the school leadership team and eating meals at the house, the picture of Umutara Deaf School's beginnings and development emerged. Forced to live in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1995 following the death of her parents, Eleanie and her sisters were raised by their uncle, Pastor Botayani, and his wife Beatrice, both deaf, and who had set up a school for the deaf in Kisangani, Congo. From the age of twelve, Eleanie learnt the beauty and power of education in the natural language of deaf people everywhere, sign language.

The support and warmth of this deaf community opened her heart and vision to their aspirations and hopes, and on return to her homeland in 2003 this led her to develop the same deaf education in the Eastern Province of Rwanda where no provision existed. She inspired her husband Dominique, a Baptist Pastor, to this same vision, and together they registered the NGO, Friends of Handicap in Rwanda (FHR), as the vehicle for empowerment of deaf children and wider disability initiatives.

The first project of FHR was Umutara Deaf School (UDS), offering residential placement to ensure that all deaf children throughout Eastern Province Rwanda could attend. With the offer from the Government of a 2.5 acre plot of land, Umutara was formed in 2006 beginning with 14 deaf children. By 2007 86 deaf children were boarding there, while facing a major challenge of insufficient mattresses and food, with water in short supply during a long drought season. However, the following year was a time of turnaround with organisations from Germany and Canada renovating dormitories and toilets, constructing new classrooms, vocational rooms and water tanks.

The school was deliberately designed to confront the challenges of its area, particularly children and youth struggling to move out of extreme poverty and a lack of social and educational opportunity which leaves many from poor families unable to continue their education. Now in 2017 the school had 118 children moving successfully through pre-school and primary education and a Vocational Training Centre where the deaf youth learn the skills of masonry, tailoring and

hairdressing.

Each day for five weeks, the team and I met to discuss and document first of all exactly where they felt the school had reached in its development and how effectively it was presently operating. From that base of clarity, we moved into articulating how they wanted Umutara to develop over the next three years. Finally, having done this, we looked at the ways in which that development could be implemented and funded.

Each day followed a steady pattern. Waking early by the sun streaming through the window at 5.30am, breakfast of omelette, bread and nescafe, then working from 8.30 through to 3.30 in the afternoon, broken only by a large lunch that always seemed the size of dinner and risked sending me to sleep.

The evenings came early, with the sun disappearing into darkness very quickly around 5pm, and were a time of quiet in my little house, writing up the business plans and planning the following day's work. It was also a good time to research more deeply the background and structures of this little country, particularly through wide conversations with Pastor Omar. Steadily, a picture emerged of the internal challenges of the country and how over many years they had been addressed.

The most recent statistics put Rwanda's population at around 11.5 million. There is a youth bias within the population and the political focus of Rwanda, with the age group 0-35 accounting for 78.7% of the population in the 2012 Population Census. Women make up a slightly higher proportion of the population than men, while unemployment rates are higher among young women, particularly amongst those young women living in the urban areas.

For Administrative purposes the country is divided into four Provinces plus the Capital of Kigali, with a further sub-division of 30 Districts. The political system is Republican, with a Presidential and multiparty system. The incumbent President, Paul Kagame, was elected with a landslide majority in 2003 to a seven-year term, during which the country is credited with making strong socio-economic and political progress, promoting peace, stability and social cohesion in contrast to past divisive politics. In 2010 the President was re-elected to a second term on a platform of economic development.

GDP growth in 2014 was calculated at a substantial 7%, with GDP per capita of \$718. Agriculture accounts for 33% of this GDP, with Industry at 14% and services at 47%. A modest inflation rate of 2.4% was recorded in the same year, with a credit rating of B+ described as positive and stable. For agriculture, the principal food crops are bananas, beans, cassava, groundnuts, maize, millet, potatoes, rice, sorghum and wheat. Industry is focused on cement, agricultural products, small-scale beverages, soap, shoes, plastic goods, textiles and cigarettes.

Omar and Dominique shared how country-wide development had been brought to their area as part of the deliberate healing plan for the country since the 1994 genocide. Beyond the large development of roads brought in by China's development plans I had seen on the way from Kigali, electricity had been brought to this rural area around seven years ago. This was such a major development that people had abandoned their homes all over the hillsides in order to have a home alongside the road where the electricity infrastructure was established. As a result, at night the pattern of roads could be clearly seen across the hillsides where only darkness had been before.

After four weeks of intensive team work, the past and present of Umutara were agreed, and the future mapped. This is the crucial point in every planning facilitation – knowing where you have been and reached, you now know where you want to be – and what it actually costs. The room which often felt loud and full of warm and strong opinions felt quieter as we moved into the next crucial stage of review, deciding what to keep and what to trim now that the picture was clear. In the end, almost everything that had been proposed remained in the plan - mostly a good sign.

The final week dealt with two questions – how would the plan be implemented and how would it be funded. Intense discussion developed into an action plan and the beginnings of a funding plan, in which sustainability of developments beyond the three year life of the plan was also addressed.

Umutara had clearly worked hard and thoughtfully developing productive use of its land for food, and over time this would continue to contribute to sustainability. However, its ability to maintain its present work of primary level education (P1 – P6) and vocational training was challenged by the low level of wages it paid its teachers. Despite training many of its deaf teachers, turnover was high as staff looked elsewhere in the country for a more liveable wage. Secondary level education that had been developed over several years previously had been discontinued due to the ending of an INGO grant.

The business plan therefore focused on two key areas for funding. The annual running cost budget was increased to reflect salaries that would retain staff throughout the organisation, and also an increased food budget that would better feed the children. Secondly, capital and equipment costs were greatly increased to provide both the planned development and the fundamental equipment that was needed from year one onwards.

While the plan for implementing development over the three years was relatively straightforward, pending a few key decisions, the challenge of funding was much more difficult to draw out.. Although government assistance had produced a free piece of land and some on-off annual food assistance for the pupils, any further substantial assistance was unlikely. Moving from a private school to being a public or semi-public organisation was discussed, with the consensus to probably move to a semi-public status about five years hence, though this would make only a modest difference to annual funding. The outline funding strategy that was finally developed concentrated on the researching and initiating of new funding relationships from outside the country, together with some in-country targeting of the medium to large national corporate sector and major international brands.

Friday evening became shopping night with a difference. The meals from Dominique and Eleanie's kitchen were full of the good healthy local staples of Rwanda's farming community, and I grew steadily outwards on the fullness of it. However, everyone in the family enjoyed a little extra something for taste, Eleanie her sardines, Dominique his pasta and curry oil, me my digestive biscuits and for the children as the world over, sweets, all special treats in the town of Nyagatare.

Although just forty minute drive from the school, all car journeys were an expedition in piling in as many people and extra business as possible, departing from my house with just a few people and collecting people steadily through the school. Often protesting at their insistence that I took the big comfortable front seat, I finally learnt that this was to guarantee a quick wave-through at all the police checkpoints!

Very much a one-horse town, Nyagatare had a special clientele that no UK Tesco could ever cater for – baboons. Ambling over from their forest home just behind the town, in packs of six or seven

they strolled ambivalently across the roads, much as any local on a Friday evening, taking in the gentle atmosphere after a serious week's labour and scratching.

With the business of shopping for treats done, and a large bag of sweets for the children hidden in the car, my favourite part of the week began. While others visited government offices and banks, still to my surprise open at 7pm, we would sit on the café patio upstairs, order the Rwandan national drink, flasks of hot milk, share our lives and watch the world pass by. In development work the world over, the best understanding of people and culture comes from drinking with it. In Rwanda's case, it came with the bonus of not having to drink the local alcohol. Over these Friday evening milks, lives, loves and visions were shared, often presided over by warm and witty perceptions, for which Omar stood out.

One especially encouraging weekend was the visit of Elevation's uncle, the Rev. Botayani, in whose deaf school Elevation and her sisters had been sheltered all those years ago in Congo. Now in his early seventies, having set up three successful deaf schools in Kisangani, Kinshasa and Goma, he and his wife, both deaf, now run the deaf school and church in Goma. Over a Saturday, as the worst tropical storm I had ever seen enveloped our house and ripped up trees, this wonderful gentleman graciously shared his life story in sign and broken English. We discovered mutual friends in the deaf community, places we had both worked in, and most of all the same passion to see deaf children everywhere empowered and fulfilled. With a request for facilitation of business planning in his school in Congo, I assured him that I hoped to visit just as soon as we could organise this.

My one regret of this first time in Rwanda was to have only a very modest experience of the deaf children themselves, my time of business planning of necessity being during the long holiday when the staff team were available. In the days just before I left, the children were beginning to arrive for the new school year, and it was, as always, wonderful to see this deaf community in action. On the day of departure for Kigali and home, the speeches, a little local dancing and the warmth of farewells made it hard to leave, and I was sure that this was just the first of the times I would spend here with these wonderful people.

This brief two-month introduction to Rwanda has so many special memories for me, all of them about the people that I met and worked with, their passion and commitment to serve the deaf children, their families and communities. I look forward to spending more time there just as soon as it can be organised for effectiveness. In the meantime, for anyone reading this and thinking of visiting Africa for the first time, do go to visit Rwanda. Having spent decades working and travelling in Africa, there is nowhere better. And of course, do stop by to check out the wonderful welcome, people and work at Umutara.

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