

Observations of Rwanda **Florah Keller-Cooper**

Rwanda by all accounts is a fairly tame African country. Most areas are quite quiet and many people have been very friendly. The most intimidating thing I've had to face are the buses. You all pile in 4 people to a row that would more comfortably fit 2-3, knees up against the seats in front of you, side pressed hard against your fellow passengers, 22 passengers routinely squeezed into a small van that's only about 3 meters by 1.5 meters. There are no passageways - you have to fold up a row of folding seats and clamber over people to exit. At every bus stop people pile out to let fellow passengers off and then everyone clambers back in again. It took a while to figure out where buses were going (as there are no street names, only general areas) and how to get off (you have to tap the side of the bus or the conductor on the shoulder). Nevertheless, they are quite fun to ride, unless it's raining, in which case I have never seen grown people swarm and push so hard to get on anything in my life.

One thing I really like is how everyone seems to pitch in. Everyone I have met has been really happy to share what they are using or doing with me. On the last Saturday of the month buses don't run and everyone is in the local community or "cell" (like a borough but much smaller, perhaps just a block or two) helping with community work, such as levelling a dirt road, or cutting down grass to discourage snakes (so I'm told). Afterwards a community meeting is held to discuss any issues. Nicolette, CM's Centre Manager, has been talking to her community about our new family planning initiative. It's a really exciting prospect to see it when it gets off the ground.

Centre Marembo is small – the workshop rooms are only big enough for the 4/5 people who work in them. Using the most basic resources they are making so many beautiful things. It's amazing to watch the card-making group work – so efficient and professional on a busted table and wobbly wooden stalls, glue which looks like it's been made at the centre from natural ingredients, a dried banana leaf and a razor blade. In about 5 seconds they take a strip of banana leaf, slide it across the glue, lay-it at precisely the right place on the card and with quick accuracy, snip it with the razor-blade into a perfect shape. Repeat three times and make an intricate little hoof for a zebra or stripes for a baby-suit. The skill astounds me.

The bead-making group has been really friendly and welcoming. Already I can roll beads with the best of them, and I'm waiting to learn how to varnish them. More importantly, by using a mixture of French, English, and a scattering of Kinyarwandan, we're getting a grasp of each other's languages. It's so great to be able to greet people, thank them and ask simple questions in Kinyarwandan.

Despite so many great projects at the centre, in many ways we are struggling. I visited the Umugongo House last week, whilst we were showing inspectors from the local authorities around. They were really impressed by what we are managing to do, particularly with so little funds, to the extent that they sent us another boy to take in, as they believed he would be better off in our care.

Nevertheless, to my eyes, I believe we can do so much more. Umugongo House is basic, with a few tables and benches in the communal room, 3 small bedrooms with 3-4 bunk beds in each room (the boys sleep 2 to a bed) and an outdoor toilet. The boy's clothes are hung on a piece of cord that loops over each bed. It would be great to source

some more funds to find some more furniture for them, to get them mosquito nets, and to build our own buildings instead of renting which is absorbing a lot of funds.

Also, whilst they receive 3 meals a day (more than many Rwandan families, who can only afford to eat once a day) the food they receive is very basic. Our funds enable us to feed them porridge for breakfast, and a combination of rice, potatoes, cabbage and beans for lunch and dinner. We can barely afford fruit, vegetables (beyond cabbage), dairy or meat.

This said, they seem so happy, laughing and smiling together all the time. They have formed a real family of protective and enabling brothers. It makes me so happy to see how comfortable and close they all are; sharing chairs and leaning on each other, their arms around each other. I will start teaching them English on Wednesdays to help with their studies (the school system has turned Anglophone over the summer holidays). I can't wait to spend more time with them.

Whilst I'm here, the thing I would most like to contribute to is the Tuesday drop-in service for street children. At the drop-in we open our doors to all the street children in Kigali who want to come for a few hours of care, some food, facilities to wash themselves and their clothes, and to see a doctor. This is also the main way that we find boys who we can support in Umugongo House. Tragically it has not been able to run yet whilst I've been here. As we do not have the funds to provide the services, we have nothing to offer them. For me it is the most important thing to get this drop-in running again. The vulnerable youth and former-street children already at the centre need things, but these street boys have little to nothing. It costs about £1,000 to run the drop-in project for 3 months. My greatest wish for my time in Rwanda is to have been able to see at least one Tuesday-drop-in taking place. Further than that, I would love to increase the frequency of our drop-in and increase our capacity to take more boys in.