

KINAMBA COMMUNITY PROJECT

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I still remember my first day at the Kinamba Community Project. As I pushed open the blue gate, a group of small Rwandan children rushed toward me and threw their tiny arms around me. “Good morning, visitor!” they bellowed. I returned their greeting with a smile. I threaded my way among women sitting on straw mats who were chatting and weaving traditional Rwandan baskets. The classrooms were full of eager, well-mannered, and joyful children. I was drawn to this place because it truly served the community by providing education to children and skill building to adults. The most important role in my opinion, however, was that of a safe harbor: a place where children learned and played without fear or hunger and women helped each other grow and find empowerment. During the ensuing months the school and community welcomed me into their homes and lives.



The relationships I formed with the Rwandan staff were enriching. I experienced their culture and warm, generous spirit. They are extremely dedicated to the children and the community. When I arrived each morning, I would always receive a warm welcome and a big smile from each of them.

My wife Sarah, who is a nurse working with a healthcare programme in Rwanda, and I took some of the older Primary children on little excursions sometimes. On one occasion we hiked Mt. Kigali and were lucky enough to see a monkey. This was a special experience for the children who typically do not venture outside of the city.





Sarah also took a few of the children to cheer me on during the Kigali Marathon in May. Throughout my training, a few children would consistently ask me how my running was coming along and how many more days until the marathon. The final stretch of the race was in the national stadium and two of the boys were kind enough to escort me on that last lap.

I worked with Primary 4 and 5 for many months and in mid-July I left to go back to the United States. I cannot recount all of the achievements and challenges of the children I had witnessed over that time. Nevertheless, I came to understand that the important things that the Kinamba Community Project gives these children go beyond school materials and learning arithmetic and English. They get respect, dignity, character and emotional development. It took me months to realize just how important these things are



to the children's development; things I think are sometimes taken for granted in other places. When I said goodbye to them on my last day, I was at a loss for words. All I could manage was "I'll miss you." But what I wanted to say to all of them was how proud I am of all of them. How I am so happy to see how curious they have become. How I am happy and proud that they ask more 'why' and 'how' questions. That Sarah and I will never forget them. That they worked so hard and accomplished so much that often times I had to remind myself just how difficult their lives are. That they are each very special. But as I told Meg, I think the tears welling up in my eyes said enough – and they understood. In a culture where a man should not cry, I did.

John Horwath (volunteer)