

Deedee Blais, '09
Kigali, Rwanda

When I, Deedee Blais boarded the plane at JFK airport I had no idea what was in store for me. After taking the semester long preparatory class I had heard plenty of stories and been exposed to many scenarios that could occur on my journey. The truth was that I don't think any class could prepare me for what I was about to see. After 3 flights and many hours in airports we, Amanda, Erica and I landed in Kigali, Rwanda.



Figure 1 Rwanda Countryside

The first thing I remembered thinking was wow, this is beautiful. The green spread for miles, with only one small building as the airport. I felt that I had stepped back into a simpler time, the constant chaos and white noise of my everyday life was no longer present. In my journal I wrote "I could not imagine what this experience would be like. I still can't and I'm here experiencing it." It was as if I entered a surreal reality. We picked up our bags and headed out to meet the Missionaries of Charity nuns, whom we had arranged the trip through.

We stayed in a small convent down the street from the orphanage where we would be working. It was a simple set up, two beds, a sink and mosquito nets. We began our work the next day.



Figure 2 The Road to the Orphanage

The first day in the orphanage is one that I can't even explain. Walking into a place and seeing all of these beautiful children but in conditions that we would not even expose our animals too made me shudder. I could not even cry, it was a shock; how could they be living like this when we have so much? The 150 children were divided into four groups. The first were new borns, which we were not able to assist with because of disease. The rest were divided into infants, toddlers and the last group of what I would call pre-k to kindergarten aged children.



Figure 3 Toddler Sleeping Area



Figure 4 Toddler Pen Outside



Figure 5 Erica and Amanda (in white) with the toddlers (the women in red are the workers).

The worst part of the division system was that there were no ages for each room. Most of the children who were at the orphanage had been abandoned, found in gutters, toilets or left in front of the orphanage. Many had no names and were given names at the orphanage, although it was rare that their names were used. They had no birthdays and so their movement from group to group depended on markers, standing, walking and size were among some of them.

Each division had their own room. The new borns and infants never left their room. It made me cringe to know that these babies never saw sunlight, no fresh air. They were lucky to be moved to the floor so that they had room to crawl. The toddlers shared the room with the infants but during the day they were led to a pen outside. Finally, the oldest group had a pavilion type set up outside that they would play in. I think one of the most shocking things I saw when we arrived was the oldest children in the pavilion. Most were not potty trained and because the younger children used the few cloth diapers they would just pee and poop on the ground as they played.

Eventually, we got into a routine at the orphanage and certain kids became our special ones. My "baby," Geraldine was my heart.



Figure 6 Geraldine and I

I would've brought her home in a heart beat if I could have and not a day goes by where I don't wonder what she is doing. When I first got to the orphanage she had just been moved to the oldest group. She was very shy and timid. I remember watching the children get crackers, as they did daily, and an older child walked over to her, took her cracker and walked away. It broke my heart. She did nothing; she just sat there and let the child take her cracker. Contrary to what we teach children here, defense and strength is necessary for these children. I began picking her up everyday and playing with her and soon she was my "gate keeper." We used to play a game where they would sit on our laps and we would bounce them up and down. With no toys we quickly became jungle gyms. Geraldine would choose the children who got to sit on my lap. Soon everyone wanted to be her friend so that they could be on my lap. As the weeks went on my bond with Geraldine grew even more. One day when I got to the orphanage she was laying on the ground, I picked her up and knew immediately that she had a fever. I brought her inside; sure enough she had an extremely high fever. I asked the nun for some Tylenol but they had none. Instead she brought over a shot to give Geraldine. It broke my heart to watch her cry from the fever and then from the shot. I knew in that moment what every mother must feel like when their child was sick. I would have done anything to make her feel better. She got better after a few days as was back to her usual games. On the last day as I watched the children get their crackers I saw her move from the grabs and defend herself. I knew that eventually, with out me, she would've learned too, just as the other kids did but I was so proud.



Figure 7 Geraldine and I at a special picnic for the children.

Along with the orphanage we taught English to street children. I really respect teachers after going through this experience. It was extremely difficult to teach because we were trying to teach them English but we did not know their language, Kinyarwanda. We taught them songs like head, shoulders, knees and toes and gave them small worksheets that we made by hand before every class. The journey to the school was no easy feat. We had to pile into their buses, which had no capacity limits. Usually it was a pushing and shoving game to get on and then we piled on top of each other, in the end it was always worth it.



Figure 8 Some of the boys at the school and I.

Looking back on my time in Kigali I feel that it was not enough. I know I will return someday to give back because they gave so much to me. The children taught me that it is not material goods which bring a smile, it is attention. The babies would stop crying no matter what was wrong once you picked them up. They were all craving attention and love, the simplest touch or gesture would lead to a giggle or a smile. A simple song or chant would turn into a game that lasted hours. The people of Kigali taught me that you can still find happiness in life, even after the destruction of the Genocide. The Missionaries of Charity taught me that even if you have nothing you can still give. Now back in the United States I sometimes find myself getting frustrated, we have so much, yet it is never enough. Why can't we be content having food, clean water, a home for our children and life outside of survival? We watched as the Missionaries of Charity handed out rations of bulgur wheat, children would scrounge pieces out of the dirt because sometimes that ration of wheat was all their family of 7 would have for the week.

As I get ready to enter into medical school I will never forget the faces of those children, their smiles and their tears. I won't forget the street children who were eager to learn and to go to school because they were the lucky ones. They never wasted their education as many do in our country, I hope I can cherish and really appreciate what I have been given in life and always remember those who are not as lucky, especially those children in Kigali who opened my eyes to the world.



Figure 9 Amanda, Erica and I in front of the orphanage, I would not have made it through this experience without these two girls.