

Amanda Wingle, '09
Kigali, Rwanda

On May 20, 2008, Deedee Blais, Erica Troy, and I flew out of JFK International Airport on the adventure of a lifetime. We were headed half a world away to Kigali, Rwanda, where we would spend seven weeks working in an orphanage.

When we arrived in Kigali, two nuns from the Missionaries of Charity were there to greet us at the airport. They showed us the convent where they lived, as well as the guesthouse where we would spend the next seven weeks.

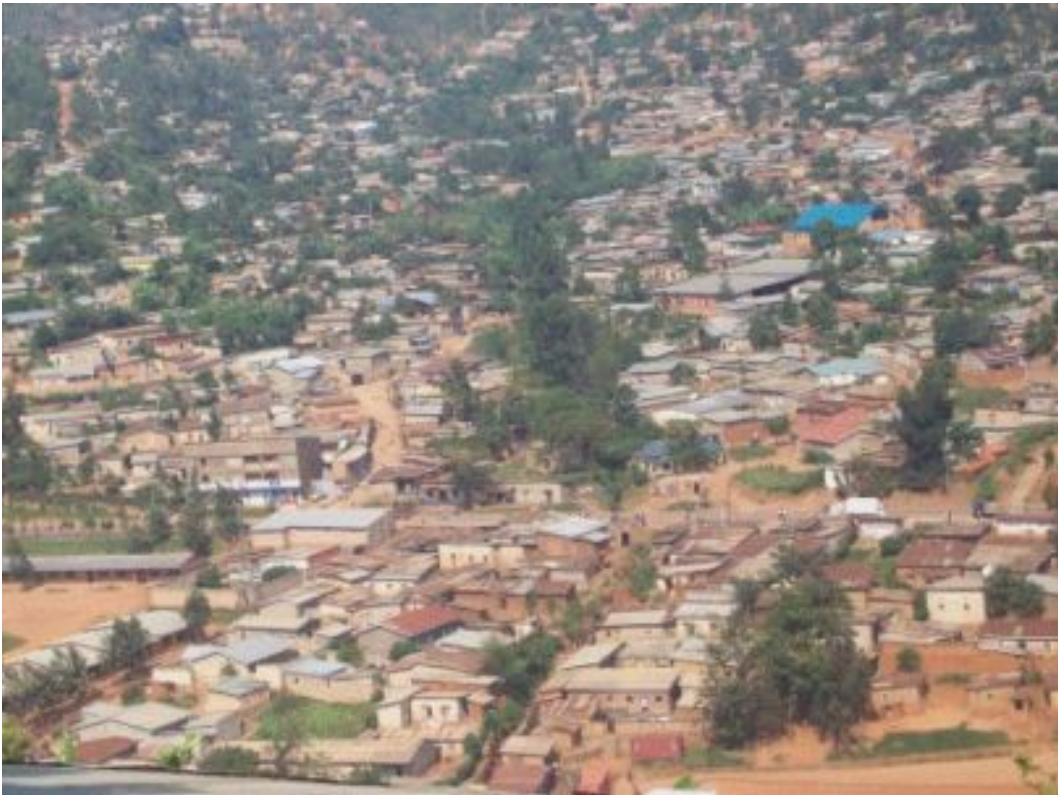


Photo 1. Kigali, Rwanda.



Photo 2. The guesthouse in Kigali, Rwanda, where we lived for 7 weeks. The rooms were simple but clean.

The next day, it was time to meet the children at the orphanage. There were about 150 children, all under the age of 5, at the Missionaries of Charity orphanage in Kigali. Needless to say, it was chaotic at times, but I loved working with the children. They were divided into groups by age, and we tried to spend a little time with each group every day. In the mornings, we fed and played with the toddlers, then the older children (ages 3-5). On some afternoons, we spent time with the infants.



Photo 3. One of the orphans, Natalie, and I.

One of the things that struck me the most about the orphans was how grateful they were for the littlest bit of attention. It wasn't even necessary to entertain them in any way because they were happy just to sit on your lap or be held; I could have used a few more hands because they all wanted to be held all the time! During our last week, we tried to make each day special by bringing a small treat or conducting an activity for the children.

My favorite thing that we did was painting designs on their hands with school paint. They absolutely loved it, and some would even go inside to wash it off so they could sneak back for another turn!



Photo 4. A satisfied customer after having his hand painted!

We were also offered the opportunity to teach an English class to impoverished young adults. So on three afternoons a week, we would take a bus to a school in Kicukiro (about 15 minutes away from Kigali) where we offered an English class. Our students at the school were about our age, and were very eager to learn English. They carefully took notes and copied down whatever we wrote on the blackboard. Since they spoke mostly Kinyarwanda (the native language) and very little English, we purchased books that had lessons in both Kinyarwanda and English. The language barrier was one of our most pressing challenges while in Rwanda, but having Kinyarwanda translations for our English lessons made it a little easier for the students to understand what we were trying to convey. It was especially gratifying when one especially motivated student named Rose pulled me aside and said, "you helped me learn English."



Photo 5. Our English students in a typical classroom at the school.



Photo 6. Me putting an English lesson on the blackboard.



Photo 7. Rose and I in the schoolyard.

In the United States, it seems that we are always searching for more. We are constantly being judged on what we achieve, and often only the greatest achievements are recognized. However, in Rwanda, where they have so much less than we do, the people are happy. Since they are not always looking for bigger and better things, they are grateful for any small contribution you make. I did little more than hold babies and write English words on a blackboard for seven weeks, yet I left feeling that I had made at least a small difference for the orphans and young people with whom I interacted. As Mother Teresa said, "We cannot do great things on this Earth, only small things with great love."