

BEACON OF HOPE RISES FROM FIELD OF TERROR - Boston women help build Rwandan girls school

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Author: Bella English

Date: Mar 30, 2008

NYAMATA, Rwanda - The African sun high overhead, drummers pound out a welcome as two chartered buses pull up to the school, 40 minutes south of Kigali. Out step two dozen women from the Boston area, some accompanied by their husbands, a few with their adult children in tow.

Eyes and smiles widen at the scene: a beautiful oval-shaped campus of nine orange-brick buildings, including computer and science labs, a dorm, dining room, and classrooms. Where just two years ago lay a barren piece of land is the Maranyundo School, named for the mountains in the distance. The terrain is dusty and dry, subject to drought and famine, and the school rises from the ashes of the 1994 genocide that decimated the area.

Unlike the star-studded extravaganza that marked the opening of Oprah Winfrey's \$40 million girls school in South Africa - an event attended by the likes of Spike Lee, Mariah Carey, and Tina Turner - the Maranyundo celebrities are a bunch of women from Boston, led by a nun from Southie. But to the 60 girls sitting in the melting heat last month with ankles crossed and hands folded, the women are more than celebrities: They are life-savers. The girls are spiffy in their new uniforms: white blouses with skirts and kerchiefs that match the sky. Behind them, proud family members have been standing all morning, waiting for this moment.

The students, who have been chosen for high scores on national exams, rise, and dance and sing an ecstatic song of welcome. The chorus is thick with the accents of those new to English: "We are hap-pee." At that line, the American guests laugh and clap. They are happy, too, for it is they who have helped build this school under the direction of a 74-year-old nun who had never before been to Africa and now can't seem to stay away.

It's an odd story, this mingling of monied Boston-area women and poor African girls. But the parts fit perfectly: The girls had a dire need for education. The Boston women had seen it firsthand and could write the checks.

They did more than that, from selecting an architect to working with Rwandan builders and educators, landscaping the site, hiring staff - most of it Rwandan - and fussing over details from uniforms to shrubbery.

Jane O'Connor, principal of Mother Caroline Academy in Boston, serves as mentor to the Maranyundo School principal. Jennifer Jones of Cambridge, a

landscape architect, selected trees and shrubs that would be both pretty and practical. Jill Costello of South Boston heads the building committee, working with the Rwandan architect and contractor. Barrie Landry, who lives in Back Bay, is head of development for the school. Mary Nee of Milton is treasurer. And so on. There are 60 Americans at the opening, nearly all supporters from Boston.

A newcomer to the effort is Sukey Grousbeck, whose son Wyc owns the Celtics. Though she lives in California, she heard about the school at the Celtics' opening game this season and signed on.

At the opening of the school, Maureen Ruetters, whose husband, Mike, is the retired chairman of EMC Corp., takes the microphone to tell the girls that the Boston women draw such energy from their smiles "that we can never say no to you."

It's a good thing, because it's a given that Sister Ann Fox will be asking.

Powerful message

Less than two years ago, construction began on eight arid acres that were the former site of a concentration camp for the minority Tutsis. Both the Bostonians and the Rwandans find powerful symbolism in that: young girls breathing new life into a once-desecrated patch of land.

The seeds for the school were planted at a chance meeting in 2000 between Sister Ann, who runs the Paraclete Center in South Boston, and Senator Aloisea Inyumba of Rwanda. They both attended a Women Waging Peace conference at Harvard made up of those from conflict areas around the world, including Sister Ann.

Southie, a conflict area? The thought amused Sister Ann, but she went anyway. Later, she invited the women back to dinner at her center on E Street. Inyumba was immediately taken by the after-school program at the Paraclete, with its robotics, computer and science labs, and extensive library.

"Can you come to Rwanda?" she asked Sister Ann. "We need something like this for a new generation of girl leaders."

Yes, came Sister Ann's immediate reply.

"I never thought about how I was going to do this," she would say 12 trips to Rwanda later.

It wasn't easy. But Sister Ann, who has a degree in social work and a talent for shaking people down for a good cause, had made a promise. And who could use a school more than this tiny, traumatized country where the genocide resulted in

800,000 deaths in 100 days - a rate one journalist described as "five times more efficient" than Hitler's killing machine.

Fourteen years ago, the Bugesera District in the country's east province was ground zero for the genocide, a killing field where no place - not the church or town hall, not even buried up to one's neck in a swamp - was safe. In one month, five of every six Tutsis here were killed by the majority, hacked with machetes or bludgeoned with nail-studded clubs. Lucky were the few who took bullets, some paying for that "privilege."

Most of the women who weren't killed were left widows; many were HIV-infected through rape. Thousands of children were orphaned, many of them becoming heads of households before age 10.

With so many Rwandan men killed, or in exile or prison, women have had to help rebuild the country. It's a startling irony: The genocide killed their loved ones and shattered their country, but it gave women power they never had. Before the killings, discrimination was rampant: Women had few rights and little education. But the government under Paul Kagame, the former rebel leader, now has the highest percentage of female representatives in the world, and he has made it clear that educating girls is crucial to the country's recovery.

So the Rwandan government has been only too happy to help with the Maranyundo School, donating the land and providing fencing, toilets, a lab, and computers. Even the killers have contributed: The week the school opened, prisoners in their pink uniforms were dispatched to build a wall.

"This is a very good partnership," Inyumba says. "What American women are giving here is empowerment. If you give someone a fish, they eat it and it's gone. The best thing is to teach them to fish; that's sustainable."

Slow start

The partnership took years to get off the ground. After saying yes to Inyumba, Sister Ann was stymied. She'd tell people about her plan for a school in this small Central African country and they'd reply, "That's nice." It wasn't until November 2005, when she took her first group of women to Rwanda, that the project moved beyond promise. Some women she knew through Boston's philanthropic circles, and some of them brought friends into the fold.

"On the plane on the way back, they said, 'We'll do the school,'" says Sister Ann. Over the next two years, the Maranyundo Initiative, as they called themselves, raised \$1.8 million. Sue Pucker, who with her husband, Bernie, owns an art gallery on Newbury Street, was the original chairwoman; Beth Floor of Belmont has taken over. Many of the women have made the 30-hour trip from Boston to Rwanda repeatedly.

The first phase, for the initial class of seventh-graders waiting in the heat, cost \$800,000. Next year 60 more girls will enter the seventh grade, and the year after, another 60, for a total of 180 in Grades 7 through 9.

The girls range in age from 12 to 17, with 15 orphans among them. They sleep in a spotless, barracks-like dorm, where bunk beds are covered with colorful, patterned sheets. It is the first time most of them have had running water, electricity, and toilets. Each night the staff puts a Hershey's Kiss on each pillow. The Boston group has brought boxes and boxes of books, compact discs, and DVDs for the school library, as well as large stashes of Kisses, along with them.

The students are both Hutu and Tutsi: "We don't ask," says Sister Ann. It's entirely possible that one girl who lost her parents in the genocide could be sitting, or sleeping, next to another whose relatives killed them.

It doesn't seem to matter. "If you watch the way our girls interact with each other and their teachers, it is a community of love and support and affection, and it is so special to see," says Kate Harrington, the school's master teacher, who is from Dedham. It is her job to coach the five Rwandan teachers and also to teach English.

One of the few girls who speaks English, 13-year-old Deborah Abera, is thrilled with her new digs. "We study very well; we eat very well; we sleep very well," she says. "The schoolwork is hard. But I study because I want to be something." What? "I want to lead the Rwandan Revenue Authority someday."

Ripple effect

The girls mostly speak Kinyarwanda and French. But Maranyundo is an English-speaking school, reflecting the recent trend in Rwanda. "They have English workbooks, and they were amazed and very confused when I allowed them to write in them and not just copy out of them," says Harrington.

Parents can visit once a month. Saturdays, students clean the school and do their laundry. There's a Saturday night movie; though the girls were terrified by "Pirates of the Caribbean," they loved "Shrek." Sunday, they go to church in the village. If not for Maranyundo, most of the girls would not be going to school at all; educational reforms take money, and classrooms remain dominated by male teachers and students.

The school principal is a nun from the Benebikira Sisters, who are renowned for their interest in education, but the school itself is secular. Several of the Rwandan nuns have traveled to Boston at Sister Ann's behest, living at the Paraclete Center while taking classes at local colleges.

Similarly, Maranyundo will host Rwandan teachers from across the country when it launches a Teacher Training Institute with retired American educators. During the genocide, most of the teachers were killed and schools demolished. As recently as 2005, only half of Rwanda's secondary teachers were qualified at even basic teaching skills.

"Our footprint will be larger than this campus," says Jen Boyle, executive director of the Maranyundo Initiative, who lives in the North End but spends much of her time in Rwanda.

The school opening is a grand affair with Rwandan dignitaries, drums and dancing, lunch, and a ribbon-cutting by First Lady Jeanette Kagame. The girls have prepared a scrapbook with their photos, and dreams, for her.

"I would like to change the world by being a doctor," one girl has written.

"I would like to become a woman political leader," writes another.

Clearly, Kagame is moved as she steps to the microphone. She takes a moment to compose herself. "We were shattered as a people and a country," she says. "But today something extraordinary has happened to this region." She calls the school "a symbol of hope and youth and openness" and praises the Boston women for their work.

Then she addresses the girls. "Fourteen years ago, your country believed that with almost no resources it would rebuild, and you have no choice but to accept this incredibly motivating goal. You must dare to dream big and believe in your capabilities." Tears, applause, and the girls move through the crowd of Bostonians, bringing gifts of Rwanda's world-renowned coffee, and getting bear hugs in return.

Sister cities

Another first lady is in the crowd this day: Angela Menino. Though she is not on the Maranyundo committee, she has brought a proclamation from her husband, Mayor Thomas M. Menino, declaring every Feb. 28, opening day, to be Maranyundo School Day in Boston.

Menino's counterpart, Mayor Gaspard Musonera, who lost his parents in the genocide, addressed Mrs. Menino: He declared Bugesera and Boston to be sister cities, and would like the Boston mayor to come and see the school "to witness the pride of the people under your leadership." In the Rwandan culture, the mayor explains, the most valuable gift is a cow. "So we are giving to the Boston group a cow."

The school actually has five cows, given by various Rwandan friends, including the Kagames. "We'll have to build a cow barn," Sister Ann says later. She's excited at the prospect of the girls having fresh milk daily.

The next night, the Boston group is invited for dinner at President Kagame's office compound, where he shakes each hand and calls the school "a symbol of your investment in our people and our country."

The last night the group is in Rwanda, there's a farewell dinner at which Maranyundo committee members give out small Rwandan beaded baskets to the Boston group, along with a sheet of paper headed: "Maranyundo School Phase Two Wish List." Items range from two classrooms at \$35,000 each to a multipurpose hall at \$200,000.

As for Sister Ann, she's pondering another request that has just reached her. Can the Americans help build a companion high school, so that the middle-school girls can complete their education?

Though the paint is barely dry on the seventh-grade classrooms, Sister Ann is already thinking 10th, 11th, 12th grades.

"We'll have to do it," she says.

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