

RSVP Newsletter:

November 2009



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Visiting Bugarama November 2009

This newsletter is a little bit different from the usual RSVP monthly update. Normally our newsletter is full of facts and figures. This month is more about thoughts and impressions, as that is one of the things a trip is about. If I wanted information on how things are going I could simply have e-mailed our local project co-ordinator Fulgence or the school's headmaster Japhet. However, until a few weeks back these were just names to me, now they are real people. Real, hard working, dedicated people.

RSVP is a tiny organisation. The majority of our budget is spent on the 300 children receiving meals, but if you average our 2009 spend across all 950 teachers and children supported in one way or another, it works out at just over £10 per person. The most positive thing that struck me is how much hope such a small investment has brought to the community. I believe that the people whose lives are touched by RSVP feel that someone cares about their lot and it gives them hope. I don't live in Bugarama so I don't want to say too much about how life in Bugarama is, but my first impression is that lots of people spend their day working in fields to earn enough money to feed themselves, so that they can spend the next day doing the same. Now, most of us work for a living but in Bugarama I struggled to see where the living part came in.

RSVP has provided, meals, books, teacher training and secondary school sponsorship, with the aim of improving the education of the children at Bugarama school. It is hoped that an improved education will lead to a better job and a break in the poverty cycle for the children and their families. Everything we do is to this end, so we provide meals to children who study in the afternoon to improve their cognitive ability. Visiting the parents has shown me that the school meals programme means something else to the local people. Parents who struggle to feed their family are deeply grateful for the provision. Parents of children who could easily get a

meal at home told me that their children want to eat with their classmates and that they want them to do so as well. I think that the school meals programme has an importance to the community that is beyond my understanding, perhaps because I don't know what it is to be short of food. Providing school meals will be our biggest financial challenge for 2010. However, I have come away thinking that this part of the project is very important locally, much more important than I had appreciated.

So, are there any negative sides to the project? Yes, I think there are. The project has raised hopes and expectations. The sponsored children are under pressure to do well, the local team want to see classrooms replaced, parents want to see the school meals programme extended to the whole school and so on. Many of the answers to questions posed to us by parents and teachers were answered by an explanation of RSVP's limitations. I think that the hope and enthusiasm that has risen in the last two years is a fragile thing. The RSVP trustees have a real responsibility to show wisdom in what commitments are made in the future. To paraphrase a bit of biblical wisdom, better to do something that we haven't promised, than not do something we have said we will do.

I have come home wanting to provide more support to the teachers, wanting to extend the school meals programme, wanting to see the children in a fit for purpose school building and wanting to address some of the wider issues in the community. Some of these things need work from us, some support from local authorities, however some just need funds. So for 2010 my hope and prayer is that those who already support RSVP will encourage others to do so.

A Bit About the Trip

This is a bit about meeting the RSVP Rwanadan team and the Bugrama school parents, teachers and children, including the children that are now on secondary school. The trip also included fact finding visits to local hospitals and health centres. There will be more about that another time.

We visited the school on the last day of term. When we arrived, the children, teachers and parents were assembled in the open air. The desks that had been purchased with the grant from Kitchen Tables Charities Trust had been brought outside for the celebrations.

The children performed welcome songs and traditional dances for their RSVP visitors.



We were then presented with gifts.



Then it was our turn to present the Lap Tops from Resources for Education in African Life and the books from Cornhill School.



The morning was finished off with the presentation of certificates to the top student in each class. There was a real atmosphere of joy at the school.

Later we got our first sample of Chantel's cooking as we joined the children for lunch. Chantel and her team continue to do an excellent job in the provision of school meals.

The P6 children, pictured below, had their end of school party. Looking on I thought about what a turning point this was in their lives. The result of their recent national test will determine their future opportunities. To me, they seemed very young to be in such a position. All of the children said they would pass the test and if they do RSVP will be there to support any that need it, to ensure they are able to take up that opportunity of secondary education. Determining which children need support is difficult, but to date the Rwandan team seem to have got it right.



When the celebrations and partying were over we talked with the teachers and heard their feedback on the project. It was so encouraging to hear how keen and motivated they are. The teachers are committed to doing well by the children. They are prepared to study for university qualifications in their own time and pay their own fees but they are struggling with the transport costs to travel to Bukavo (just over the border in the Congo) each weekend. We agreed to discuss the possibility of teacher's sponsorship with the RSVP trustees on our return.

During the second week of the trip we met with secondary school children and their parents. In this, and our other meetings, we took the time to talk about how RSVP is funded. I think it would be reasonable to say that there were some misconceptions about where funds come from. There was certainly surprise that a number of the people who give to RSVP are retired or students or other people who are not rich and who give sacrificially. There is openness to the proposal of local people contributing to RSVP. Initially the monetary value of local contributions would be a small part of the project costs but it would be the seed of the future hope that RSVP will not be needed in Bugarama, as the lives of local people improve and they become able to support their own community.

The sponsored children are looking fit and well. Jean Demascene has some resits in January. His report card shows that he is well behaved and does well in English but he didn't get a pass mark in maths, physics and chemistry. To progress through the Rwandan system you need to pass all subjects. Our hope is that the holiday revision support will get him through his resits. The other sponsored children have all passed and will progress to next year. There are too many stories to write them all here so I will pick one. Christine had her first term fees paid by RSVP (all 13 children did because we only had a few days between exam results and the start of school, so there wasn't time to go through the sponsorship selection process). Her family paid her 2nd term fees and as the end of term approached she didn't think she would be coming back for 3rd term. The roof was leaking and she didn't think her parents could afford to fix it and pay the fees. When she got home she found out that she was now going to be sponsored through RSVP. Her face shone as she told this story.