

Thoughts on My Rwandan Work Camp Experience, 2009

By Brad Moody

I landed in Kigali, Rwanda, on June 21, 2010. It was a great relief to get there, as it had taken months of preparation for the five week project I was about to begin. Although I was a volunteer for an organization called the African Great Lakes Initiative, I was still required to raise over \$4,000 for construction materials for the project and for my travel expenses. In the months leading up to my trip I had organized several successful community fund-raisers. With no time to spare, I purchased my airline ticket, visited the doctor to obtain the needed vaccinations and medications, and informed the State Department of my itinerary. Finally, I grabbed my guitar, a suitcase full of mosquito repellent and malaria pills, and made the 20 hour journey to Rwanda.

Jet-lagged and culture-shocked, four other volunteers and I shuffled onto a white minibus en route to Gisenyi where we would live and help build a community center. I was excited, yet apprehensive. I felt uneasy in a country still in the shadow of its horrific genocide. I was taken to the home of my host family -- Francois, his wife and young daughter. They lived in an area with no indoor plumbing, refrigerator, or regular electricity.

The survivors I met in Rwanda told much about the nature of the bloodshed in 1994. Many lost their limbs. Many lost their homes and their livelihood. Many lost their peace of mind. What was remarkable was what was **not** lost in the aftermath of the genocide -- their hopes and dreams. When I contemplate my stay in Rwanda, it is not the genocide I think of. It is instead the remarkable perseverance and strength of the people I met.

I especially remember one young man I befriended. This 18-year old student, Manuel Frere, is one of the most talented and motivated people I have ever known. When we first met he was composing an upbeat gospel song with Francois at a local church. Manuel's skillful playing of the piano and his ability to sing were mostly self-taught. After talking about our shared passion for music, I played for him different kinds of American music. His interest in my guitar sparked an agreement that we would meet every day after I was done with the volunteer work to either practice the guitar or write music together. He was so excited and eager to learn. Manuel explained that it was rare to find a working guitar in Gisenyi, and even rarer to find someone who could play it.

So began our daily meetings where we indulged in our mutual love of music. I would instruct him on the various modes of the major and pentatonic scale and how to read tablature. He paid attention to every minute detail. He would always be able to perfectly recite the previous day's scale or lesson. After a few days he was ready to tackle longer and more

complicated passages, and play them with perfect technique. His determination to further his musical education by learning to play that guitar was inspiring.

On the long plane ride home from Rwanda, I could not help but compare my life and my dreams to those of Manuel. As a teenager contemplating my future, I often worried about making the right decisions for my future career. Music was my passion, and I often found myself seriously considering pursuing it as a career. Who wouldn't want to do one of the things they love the most for a living?

Doubt, however, got the best of me. Somewhere along the way, I was convinced that the chances of Bon Jovi becoming an astronaut were better than the chances of me becoming a rock star. I chose to put the dream of playing music for a living on the shelf. Manuel, however, has no intention of letting his dream go anywhere. He told me he wants to play music his whole life, and that is the reason why he works hard to learn everything he can about it. It really struck me to see someone pursuing such a difficult passion in a place that has no safety net- no government assistance or ability to rely on relatives as everyone is equally poverty stricken.

Thus, this is the spirit in which I find myself wanting to meet life's tests: with gusto, daring, and a sense that I cannot fail. As life places new challenges at my feet, I will remember the advantage of my privilege and circumstance. I will remember the tenacity and persistence of my friend Manuel and his belief that an education is the key to his success. In the event I choose a path that does not work out I will be forever grateful for living in a country where one can afford more than just one shot at success.