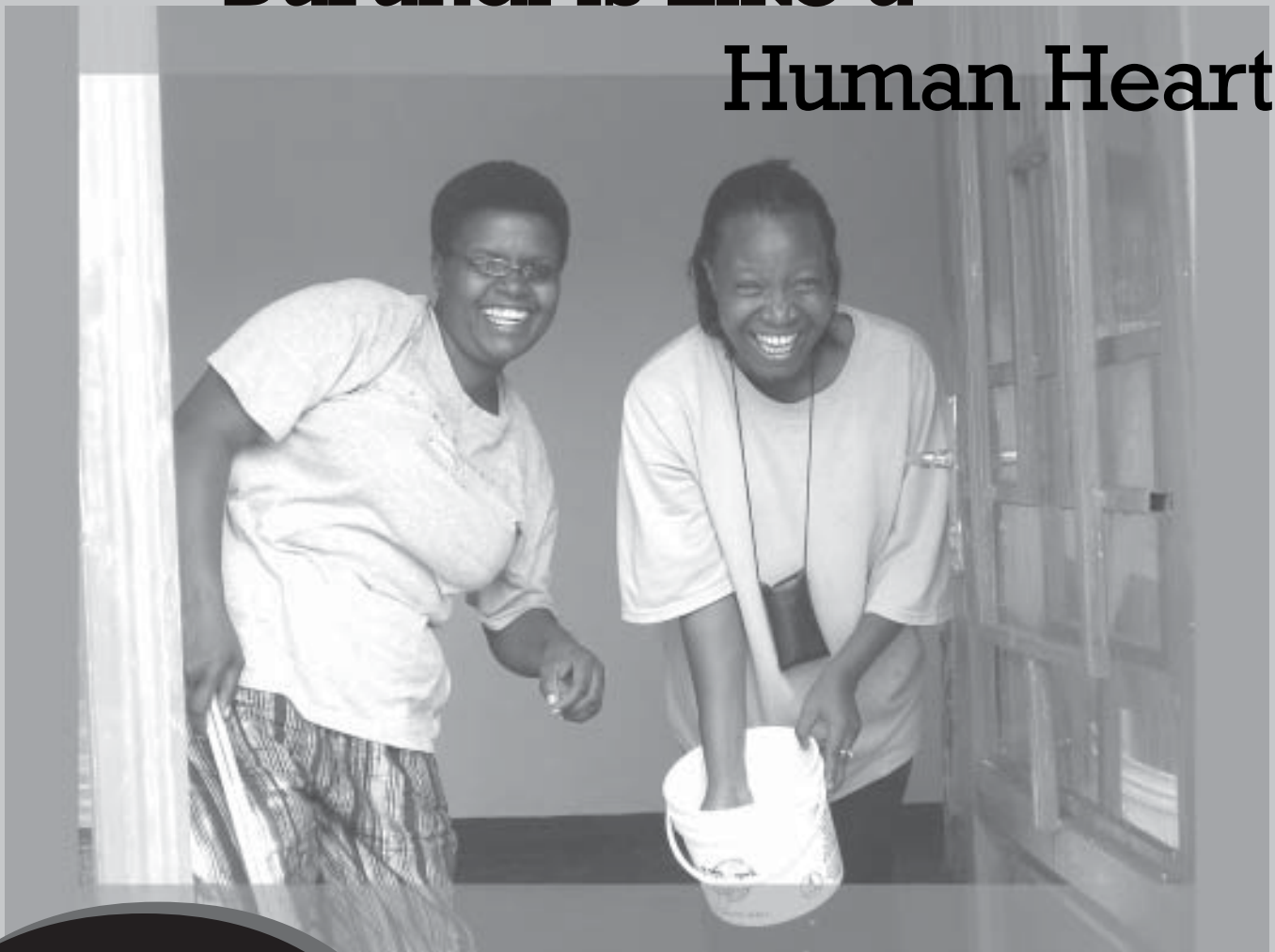


Peace Ways **AGLI**

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The Shape of Burundi Is Like a Human Heart



**THE
WORKCAMP
ISSUE**

*By Whitney Popp, AGLI Workcamper
Edited by Dawn Rubbert, AGLI Program Manager*

The following article is a series of emails sent by first-time AGLI workcamper, Whitney Popp, to her friends and family. Whitney, who is from California, had never been to Washington DC before, much less Africa. These communications have been edited, with Whitney's approval.



Whitney Popp hails from Chico, California. She is currently a senior at California State University in Monterey Bay, California where she has a Global Studies major with a minor in Peace Studies. Prior to traveling to Africa with AGLI Whitney had visited Canada, Mexico and Italy, each for about two weeks.

Whitney wrote on her application that as a "social worker's daughter I have been raised in an atmosphere dedicated to community service. Since I was about 12 years old I have worked with the developmentally disabled. This work formed my tolerance and acceptance of others while working cooperatively with volunteers".

Early in life Whitney had an experience which made her realize "that respect was the most important thing to give a person. Of course love, compassion and understanding are important but I believe those all stem from respect. . . I dedicated myself to understanding a person without passing judgment".

"Going to Africa and being in a community torn by conflict is what I want to do as a career. I wish to work in negotiation and mediation in the realm of armed conflict. I feel that it is necessary for me to look into the eyes of those in the community and understand their suffering, strength and hope."



6/23-24/07 - I am in Washington DC

I am in Washington DC now and will be attending orientation tomorrow. The flights went well and I was picked up by some others in the program and am staying at one girl's house, Chris. It's an old row house so they're right up against each other, tall skinny things. We went to Ben's Chili House for dinner and rode the bus to get there. I'm not gonna lie, I think I'm going through more culture shock here than I will in Burundi! The flight on Monday will be out of DC and goes to Ethiopia where we will stay over night. The following day we take a flight to Burundi arriving in Bujumbura. Out of the three team members I have met so far I feel like I'm the most prepared! Have no fear, my trip is registered with the embassy; I have a map, guide book, every medication possible, medical insurance and have taken all precautions necessary. As soon as I have the cell phone number that the team will be sharing I will send it in an e-mail. Right now I am jet lagged and in need of a little rest.

Tuesday 6/26/07 - I made it everyone!

I am in the airport at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We arrived last night after a 16 hour flight during which I made friends with an Ethiopian who has given me an open invitation to stay with him and his family whenever I'd like...maybe another trip to plan?? Don't worry, at least not yet. We arrived at Global Hotel and there were four UN vehicles in the front. My room was more than I deserved with a huge shower, two beds and a balcony (yes, I took pictures). Our airplane ticket included the hotel and free dinner with breakfast the following morning. We are waiting in the airport for our flight to Burundi but it has been delayed by about 45min. This morning when we were heading to the airport there was a herd of cattle going right down the middle of the street...a new experience to say the least? The people I'm going with are amazing and I know that we will all be well looked after. I was even told "I love you!" by a local man standing near a market...all in all this has been such an adventure and it's just starting!!!

Thursday, 6/28/07 - Another World is Shocking

A lot of what I am about to tell you is still overwhelming to me. We arrived yesterday afternoon and were greeted by a woman in the national police; she had a sign for

us. After a hug and a kiss on either cheek we went to gather our luggage. Our hosts were waiting outside the baggage claim area. Elie (a pastor), Alexia (doctor) and Joselyn (member of the Friends Women Association) all shook our hands and hugged us. After leaving the airport we saw cows on the road that had HUGE horns, each one was at least 3ft. We were stopped five minutes down the road by the police to check our bags - we were at a spot where the two main roads, one from the airport and the other from the Congo intersect. Once he saw the "mzungu" (white people) they let us by. After settling into our place (two bedrooms, dining/living room, kitchen and bathroom) we were introduced to many people. The cop was a member of the Women's group, Constance, and there were many more. Each introduction had to be a group meeting where everyone went around saying a little about themselves, this happened over five times. After all the greetings we took a taxi to the US Embassy so that the others may register their trip (I did mine online already). The embassy is walking distance but seeing as we are outsiders it was better to take a taxi on the first day. The embassy is the only place I have been with air conditioning and it was hard to leave. We heard music downstairs later in the

evening and found out that our place is about five feet from a church. We attended and the voices were amazing. When our host Elie went up to preach, members of the church went out of their way to sit next to us and in broken English translate his Kirundi. I am picking up Kirundi quite fast because it is a very good way to show respect to the culture.

Today I attended the AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) with 20 people. There are only five of us [Westerners] and 15 members who will be helping us fix the clinic. The bus ride there was shocking. This is poverty like I have never seen in my entire life. Women are dressed traditionally or in business suits/skirts, men are all in Western dress and dressed very well most the time. Then you see the shacks they are coming from and it's amazing. UN, AU and Red Cross vehicles litter the area along with mini buses, taxis and bikes. The program (AVP) was touching and everyone was so accepting of the new ones. Outside the clinic dirty children run around daring each other to shake our hands. Many in the AVP want to learn English and we have been having good conversations. Marci, a girl in our program, is deaf and there was an interpreter from a local school for deaf children there to translate. At lunch he told the following story that I want to share with you to show the type of situation there once was here. (This happened 10 years ago so Mom and Ally, don't worry.)

One day he arrived at school and began to teach his class like normal. Then he heard gun fire nearby. The war had broken out in Kamenge - where the clinic is. He turned on the radio to hear it full of hateful words. Then a teacher who is deaf came running inside, covered in blood. The man teacher ran outside and there

were soldiers screaming at the children "what tribe are you?" The teachers were telling them that the children were deaf and the soldiers didn't care. They killed all the children. The teacher ran back inside to calm his class and the rebels (they were Hutu) came in. The same thing happened in the class and all the children were shot. The men turned to the teacher and asked what he was. After responding "Hutu" the men left him alive with all the dead children. It was a school of 300 and only 40 survived. This man sat next to me the entire day with an amazing attitude; all the while carrying this within him. I was so saddened by the story that I broke down and started to cry. The entire area that we are working in was destroyed by the war. Only now are some shacks built to house the thousands of homeless families.

Eyes are always on you here; this is not a place many white people visit. They don't mean any harm by looking, it is just that I am the opposite color and seem to carry with me every stereotype of a white person. I am pretty sure the whole city knows we are here. It has been an overwhelming two days with sites, smells, sounds that cannot be explained. It could be depressing but it is not because the story I just told you has another part. The man went back to the school after it had been closed for three years and he is still teaching. The area has far to go because if you are deaf you are not allowed to vote and only get education until 6th grade. Nothing can ever prepare someone for this. We are all exhausted, but hopeful. Even with everything around us so hard to bear, the people that are helping us have touched me deeply. I love you all and do not worry about me. I will be fine and will continue the updates...that cell phone number is coming shortly (I hear Mother Africa calling cards are the best).

Amahoro (Peace)

Friday, June 29, 2007 - Kamenge Knows my Name

I promise to make this short and will then not be using the internet for a few days...though the addiction to it that I had before I came here is hard to break. One correction to make is that it is "Mzungu" that white people are called. I am giving you the number of our cell phone. If you call around lunch time or late morning your time I will get it before I go to bed, so that would be a good time to call. I have only two stories, they are short and only one is mine. First we will start with Fiston's because his is harder to take:

We were in the AVP workshop and were asked about a time when we thought before we reacted. My example would have been yelling at my sister, but I did not share that story. Fiston contributed this. One day there was gun fire in his neighborhood. He and many others fled into a field. There were a lot of people and his friend approached him to say that he wanted to go off with only a few people because they'd have a better chance. Fiston took the time to sit down and could hear screaming around him. He could not leave the people and told his friend he would stay for a while and then head back to his home. His friend left him to go away from the crowd. The next day his friend was killed. This man is amazing and his story just confirms the determination of this community.



Now my story: In front of the clinic, on our breaks, children will gather in groups of up to 20 to shake the *mzungu's* hand. They drag their infant siblings over even if they're crying. They are not the big-bellied, fly in the eye children; but they are not what you see in the suburbs. Most of their clothing is dirty, their faces unclean. But they are smiling; they are still innocent children with hope. We were asking what their names were and when I said that my name was "Whitney," a five year old girl ran away and came back with a child no older than one. She smiled and pointed to her sister, "Whitney!", then pointed to me "Whitney!" This little girl, who looked scared by all the children more than scared of me, had my name. It was nice the children made a connection with me, even if it was only through first names, but my heart hurt to see these children in poverty. Yet, children just want to be happy and one boy about three years old grabbed my left hand and refused to let go. He tried to kick other children that got near my hand. I swung him around and other children danced a little. They are so happy to see new people. When I left they were chanting my name...little do they know that they're stuck with me for over a month!

Sunday, July 01, 2007 - A Police Escort

Today is Burundi's Independence Day, their 45th. We walked to where the festivities were going on and decided that it was not the marching soldiers everyone was interested in, it was the *mzungu*. Everyone crowded around us and would try to speak broken English. Extremely dirty children would walk a little behind, as if I didn't know they were eyeing my pockets. I have learned to sternly say "oh-yah", which means "no." Now when I hear "*mzungu*" I respond with "da be ze" which means "I know." After seeing some helicopters fly low over the crowd we decided that unless we started to charge for tickets to the freak show it was time to go. On our way back over 15 children crowded round us and a man walked right to me, bent down and shoved his hands in my pocket. Honestly, I know I'm white, why would I put money in such an obvious place. It was beginning to get overwhelming especially because we were with only one local, Elie, our host who is a pastor of the Friends Church. All of our nerves were wearing thin and a policeman offered his assistance. He yelled at the children so they backed off about 10feet, and then walked us back to our compound. We have 3 watchmen so inside our home we are very safe. It was an experience beyond any I have had before. I know that I am a target but to have that acted upon is something else. We had lunch at Elie's home and met his five children, which is small in Burundi terms. Most families

have about 10 children. The food always consists of rice, cooked beans or peas, and carrots, some "cow," and fresh bananas and oranges. They look at the silly Americans and keep thinking we don't like the food because it is hard for me to eat so much. Elie was telling me about the politics in the country and mentioned to be careful with the children that are trying to steal things because during the war most of them were child soldiers. Burundi does not allow capital punishment and gives life sentences instead. The political situation is that the FDD party was trying to get people into very high positions so that they may take over the government. Women can be in any position in the military and it is mainly because during the war they were in rebel groups that have now integrated into the military. Before the war women were not in the military. I will stop rambling because I could go on for a long time. We all think our phone is broken because no one has tried to call us...hint, hint. You can call any time and if nothing else leave a voicemail, I know it is expensive so I will not press the matter any further. Our day is coming to an end; we left Elie's home and went to the beach on Lake Tanganyika and then headed home. I have been taking a lot of pictures so don't worry about wondering what it looks like, soon enough you will all see. I hope that everyone is doing well and I look forward to keeping you updated...even if they are just ramblings...*Amahoro*.

Tuesday, July 03, 2007 - A Morning Visitor

It's raining today. The rain woke me so I wandered into the living room where I found a stray cat sitting on a chair. He/she had also been eating our bread and was cornered because the only escape route was through me. So it ran at me; I grabbed a chair and it took off into the kitchen. No one has found it. Marcy also found a small cockroach inside our mosquito netting, which must be accepted; but, at the same time, a little part of my stomach gets upset thinking about it. Yesterday we had lunch at Dr. Alexia's house with her husband, son and many brothers and sisters. Everyone here assumes that white people eat bread with all their meals. They have even mentioned how they don't eat it a lot; yet, we have it three times a day. When I got the opportunity to speak to Alexia with only Chris [another workcamper] nearby I asked her of the war. Here is her story:

It is a miracle that no one in her family died during the war. A lot of the fighting was on the street right outside her home. They would go inside, lock the door and pray together. When the shooting was over and it was safe to come out there would be two to three bodies in the street each day. One day, a soldier came into their yard — into the kitchen, and began to fire at others outside. He then left but many other soldiers came in to find him. They only found a family and assumed it was the family shooting. After they had been beaten for over an hour, people nearby were able to convince the soldiers that the family was Quaker and could not do such a thing. The soldiers stole a few items from the house and left. Sometimes they'd run into the hills nearby and hide. Alexia said that she lost many good friends and one young cousin joined the FDD and was never heard of again.

This story came from a woman that always smiles and seems so filled with joy, and perhaps she is this way to cope or to rejoice in what she still has. I cannot read minds, so my ideas are only assumptions. Her husband, Charles, works for Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS). They provide counseling for PTSD and other symptoms of war. They also do de-briefing in communities that have been attacked. USAID is one of their biggest funders. He is writing a proposal right now to get funding for vulnerable children; HIV/AIDS orphans and street children. It was nice to see that the United States government was doing something, even if it is only one organization. THARS is also funded by CRS [Catholic Relief Services] and a few others. It is a wonderful program that is truly helping the people and is staffed by the people [as are all of AGLI's African partners]. I asked Alexia if war could happen again and she sighed, looked me in the eye, and said, "Burundians are tired of war." We met a man named Enoch last night. He is the director of bible study at the Friends Church here in Rohero. Enoch spoke very good English and was trying to convince us to come back next year to teach English at the church. I asked him why everyone is moving from French to English here and he gave many reasons. One is to communicate with other English speaking countries and to be able to read labels on medicine. There were many more, but I had never really thought of the necessity to learn English in today's world. He stayed with us about an hour and after inviting him to dinner one night we said good bye (there is a certain hand shake to show respect here that I have mastered now). That is all for now, it's time to get ready for my first day of work, again our cell phone is on us at all times so you may call whenever you'd like.

I do want to end saying that with all the stories I have told you I feel like I must mention the amazing kindness of my hosts and their families. I have never felt so loved in such a short amount of time. Though some of the people in this area do not have a lot, they give more than I deserve. I do not want to give the idea that everyone here is hostile. They are amazing, faithful, determined and hopeful. The human heart has never been bigger than in the bodies of these people. And notice the shape of the country is that of a human heart; interesting. I love you all!

Thursday, July 05, 2007 1:14 PM - For now a Photo
I typed an entire e-mail and went to add a photo, then lost the whole thing. I know there are others who would like the computer so I will make this very brief, and send a better one in the morning. Attached is a photo of me in Kamenge right outside the clinic with some children. This may be the only photo you will receive because it took me over 10 minutes to upload it. Take care. *Amahoro*.



Friday, July 06, 2007 - Getting Over an Illness

Do not be shocked or alarmed, it was bound to happen. I have fallen a little ill, all the basic sicknesses that travelers get — I've got. I spent the day reading, playing cards and sleeping and feel much better. With that said, it's time to fill everyone in!

Work has begun and we've already completed three rooms — walls, ceilings and floors. Next week we will work on the back rooms and paint the front three. Everyone I work with is great, the locals are finally accepting us as part of their background and the kids have won my heart. I know it's not right to pick favorites, but Don Toe (sp?) is always yelling my name and waving. He is so excited just to see me that I can't help but melt. An example of how people interact together on the work site is as follows:

We were taking a break in the shade when Anita (a Burundian) got a phone call. I poked fun at her saying it must be her boyfriend, Andrew. She laughed and handed the phone to me. I answered and sure enough on the other end was Andrew! We exchanged a few words in English and I gave her back the phone. Then we continued to sit around and do nothing for the moment. I caught Claire (Burundian) looking at me and she asked if I had a "sneeze." This was a few days before I was sick so I told her no, I was just thinking. Joselyn laughed and said "about your boyfriend!" Sure enough, I was. I admitted that I was and they all started to laugh. Marcy was braiding her hair and Anita told her to come, sit down, so she could braid it. After she was done she told me to sit down. I did and as I let my hair out of my pony tail Fiston (Burundian) said

something in Kirundi that made everyone start to laugh. Most of the time when they say something funny and I don't understand I began to laugh with them; and I did so. Joselyn (one of our hosts, a Burundian) told me, "He said you are a beauty!" I turned red and they all laughed again. They started to give him a hard time in Kirundi and then, in English, Joselyn said, "She has a boyfriend!!" They laughed even harder as Fiston kept saying, "I know, I know, I know!" It was even more flattering to have a compliment because it was a change of pace from the "mzungu" hollered on the streets as we walk by. Everyone here is so easy going and smiles all the time. If you are not greeted with a handshake then there is a hug coming your way. I look forward to work every day. The people we work with are so caring and I've now taught the children how to play hopscotch! If I can tell you only one thing to remember about Burundians it is to never pity them or feel bad for what they have gone through but to admire the hearts and souls that continue on and are determined to bring to themselves and others a better life.

I love you all and am feeling much better than this morning so have no fear, I will kick this illness. We have a school for deaf children and a wedding to visit tomorrow and I am looking forward to it. I will take many pictures, but as for uploading them...you may all have to wait a few more weeks.

Amahoro -Whin-ee (as the children pronounce my name)

Sunday, July 08, 2007 – Emanuel

Some children are raised with the story that *mzungu* eat children. This myth is more often told up-country and there have been incidents where children, and even some adults, have run away when they see white people. If it is not that we eat children, it is that we have a lot of money and candy. "Mzungu, Bonbon" is sung by most children in Kamenge. I heard another story that one former workcamper really did bring a huge bag of candy so this one may not be a myth. Sometimes children approach us to shake hands and you can tell they were dared by friends who are standing at a safe distance, laughing. But other times children really want to be your friend and have a soft spot for you, no matter your color. This is a story of what happened today and I am touched by how much love one little boy can hold.

His name is Emanuel; he is the middle child of three belonging to Claire. Claire is a beautiful woman that is a nurse who helps us with the clinic. Her little boy is about six years old. I had met him once before but he was shy and sat to the side when others were around. Today I came out of our home and saw Claire in the courtyard. When I went down to greet her Emanuel came running at me and gave me a hug. Usually a handshake is what children long for, but he went right in for the hug. Though about six or seven years old, he only reaches to about my waist. I scooped him up in my arms and he gave me the biggest smile. From then on he would seek me out and smile until I'd come over to him for a hug. He'd laugh, run around, and come back for more. During our 3-hour church service I could see him outside playing and every



once in a while looking in to see if I was paying attention to him or the service; I was paying attention to him because the service was in Kirundi and my cold has made it miserable to sit too long without being able to blow my nose. At the end of the service we played a little more; even though he had the choice to play with the many children running around, he picked me. The joy that one boy can give me is overwhelming. We couldn't speak to each other but we were friends. I am learning that language is so small to worry about when it comes to making connections, especially with children. They have an unwritten language that I am fortunate enough to have figured out; at least Emanuel's version.

When I play with the children here you can tell that all the adults' eyes are on me. They are probably wondering, "how will my child react, how do white people play with kids..." I'm sure the list goes on. For the most part I tend to ignore the outside world when playing with children. Of course if their parents are nearby I make the acknowledgement and exchange a few words so they know I mean no harm. For the most part the children here are so excited to play, even if it's only peek-a-boo (little Nora from back home's favorite). The children let me hold their hands when walking through streets which I believe helps some adults see that *mzungu* are not here to show off their wealth; all I want to do is be able to have some part of me fulfilled that can only be done by children.

I didn't mean for this e-mail to be so cheesy, but I'm not going to revise it. This is how I feel and how I experienced something today. Children are the same all over the world; but for some reason, it is only here, with more challenges to communicate, that I have noticed such joy in hard circumstances. I hope that everyone is doing well and if anything exciting is happening in your lives please fill me in! *Amahoro.*



Tuesday, July 10, 2007 10:50 AM -

We Are All Mzungu

There is an on going joke in our group that any local person associated with us is *mzungu*. Joselyn has almost accepted it, but we have been talking about me becoming Burundian, so we'll see where it goes. Fiston still refuses to admit to it but he laughs along with us when we call him *mzungu*. The workers that are paid at our site sometimes stay to themselves, except for Samuel who is an amazing guy. Today we had to whitewash some walls and the painters were excited that I was taking a lot of pictures. There was such a contrast of the white paint on their dark skin that I couldn't resist. I pointed to one and asked "*mzungu?*" They cracked up and for the rest of the day we poked fun at each other. The guy who gets the water has begun to smile at me more and I feel that we white folk are finally being accepted as workers.

Before lunch Anita and I went for a walk to her sister's school. The school was closed but all the students were there hanging outside the buildings. She asked me to stay with some of her friends while she ran to find her sister. I sat in between two men about my age and the line of questions began: why are you here; where are you from; what is your job; are you a student; what do you like to study; and finally, the most asked question of all, are you single or married? Everyday I am asked this question by at least two people. I told them I have a boyfriend. They asked what he did and before I could answer they answered for me, "Is he a soldier?" I said he's in the military and they all started to laugh. No matter what you are in the military you are always a soldier here. The guy yelled to another man about my age and said, "Hey you, hear this, you are a soldier too!" He smiled and said, "Yes, I am a soldier, I will be your second boyfriend while you are here. I will get 15 men to protect you at all times and you will be very happy with me." I laughed with everyone else, thanked him, but said it wasn't necessary. I gave Anita the "let's go please" look and we left. The school is only a 3-minute walk from the clinic and I have a feeling this won't be the last time I see the soldier or his friends. When I am complimented here it is so nice because I'm always thinking that all they see is an *mzungu* woman and nothing more. But then there are rare occasions when all of that is thrown to the side and I am just a visitor who happens to be at marriage-age in Burundi.

Just another tiny glimpse into a huge scenario — I hope everyone is doing well. *Amahoro*.



Wednesday, July 11, 2007 - Washing Hands

I know that I have mentioned him a few times, but I feel that I should expand on this person because of an incident that happened today. I don't know his name; I call him Waterboy. He rides his bike back and forth from our work site to a water pump with two to four huge jugs of water. This water is either put in a big barrel for cleaning hands, equipment, cement and anything else needed or it is sent to the back of the clinic where people are cooking our lunches. When I first went to help him with one of the jugs he was hesitant to let me carry such a heavy load. I was determined and by his third trip he gave up resisting my help and just pointed to where it should go. A few days later it was an assumed task of mine and he'd smile at me when he approached the clinic on his bike. A smile here goes so far for me. My skin color is enough to feel like an outsider, but the looks of some are hard to take; so I was thankful for the gift. I learn more and more each day that smiles are gifts that should be given at all times. I moved from dumping the water jugs to helping him put the empty ones back on his bike. The past two days he

has accompanied me when I go outside to play with the children and is quick to scold them when they get out of hand. He watches over me in a sense. Painting has begun and as I mentioned in my last e-mail I poked fun at the painters by calling them *mzungu*. Waterboy was helping paint and he just smiled and pointed back calling me an *mzungu*. Today I painted a lot and was covered with the off white/yellow paint. I went out to the big barrel where two of the painters were washing their hands. I joined in and we exchanged smiles. Waterboy walked up to me, looked at my hands, smiled, took one in his hand and started to scrub off the paint for me. The next five minutes passed with me working on one hand, and him helping with the other. For some reason my skin has decided that the paint is lotion and as I type this I still have it on my hands, but Waterboy's actions touched me deeply. I have never in my life had someone who I cannot even communicate with come up to me and help with a task that seemed so personal. The other painters laughed and helped a little as well, but Waterboy went out of his way to come help me. I think we are developing a very good friendship; maybe I should ask what his name is!

I suppose that is all for now, others want the computer and I should rest...maybe work on getting that paint off. I cannot wait for tomorrow; I was informed that Friday we get to go around town looking at shops and such with Joselyn (who we have finally decided is *mzungu* off the bus, but on the bus she is a local that just kind of knows us — though we are always yelling her name and saying hello when she tries to ignore us, she'll laugh and give in). *Amahoro*.

Thursday, July 12, 2007 - What a Day

For those of you who know me well, you know that at times I am somewhat an emotional rollercoaster. I feel that this should be the disclaimer before I begin the e-mail. Today started like all the others, I woke up first, got ready and woke up others around 7am. We met Samuel outside and went to the bus. The driver took more money than he should have, about 1000 Burundi francs, which is only a dollar so we weren't upset, but Samuel almost got into a fight with the man. I was proud of him for sticking up for us even though the man never gave us back our money. I worked incredibly hard today sifting sand, stirring concrete, sending buckets of concrete into rooms and helping to empty water jugs. In general, I was frustrated because it is hard for me to live with other Westerners so different than me for so long and my tolerance level was wearing thin. I tried to get over my frustration by working hard and sticking with the locals. Anita and I

Here are a few "looks" that I have learned to master while riding the bus and walking around.

"Don't mess with me, I'm not that stupid" (this is usually accompanied by a closing of the bus window when men come up and try to ask for money or to say things I don't understand)

Good luck stealing my money" (it's in my sock!)

I see you staring at me and I will stare back" (eventually they will look away or I will get a smile)

I acknowledge I am an outsider but respect you for not pointing it out" (this is an eye contact, small smile and slight head nod)

I'm just *mzungu* so I can look at you" (this is usually when I am staring at the over 100 police officers we pass on our way to the work site, I'm not making up this number)

went for a walk to her sister's house and played with children aged 3 and 1. Afterward we went to her school (not in session) and met two of her teachers. They were very kind and kept thanking me for coming, even though I was sweaty and covered in drying concrete. After work we took the bus home with Dr. Alexia and because I was still frustrated I took a shower to cool down (we only have cold water so I knew it'd work). I changed and came out to the living room. Desperate for a little alone time I went out to our porch and saw Alexia approaching. We spent some time with her in our living room and then she said that there was a Dowry ceremony and she could take two people. I jumped on board because I wanted to get away from everyone and thought it'd be a different experience. Now comes an experience (which happened only an hour ago) that will forever stick out in my mind.

This couple met in the FDD party as rebel fighters and fell in love after the war when working as guards in the prison. In the ceremony the bride's family comes to receive money and/or gifts in return for their daughter. It is a huge game. While the real fathers sit on a couch watching, two appointed "fathers" negotiate what will be given and how. The "father" of the bride was Charles, Alexia's husband, and the "father" of the groom was another friend of the family. Charles explained how a house was destroyed and they needed money for the house to be rebuilt. The two fathers went into a back room and Charles came out holding a bunch of flowers that represented money. He explained that the house was built and it had good paint and concrete. They call the bride a cow because in Burundi a cow is the most important thing you can possess. The groom's father asks to see the bride so that he may know that the bride's family has not changed her for someone of lesser quality. With everyone singing a song, the bride comes out, greets the groom, sits down and the groom acknowledges that it is her. The groom's father says that the groom must mark her so he will know it is her (traditionally this happens a year before the marriage; this couple will be married on Saturday). The groom gives her a wedding ring and everyone claps. Then food is brought out. I noticed that everyone was getting food except Marcy, me and Alexia. I asked Alexia why and she explained the culture's view of *mzungu* in a way that embarrasses me. She said that we don't eat a lot and are important people, so we must go and make our own dish in a smaller plate. We had to follow a man up to the front of the ceremony, in front of EVERYONE (by the way, the whole thing was filmed) and go to a side room where the food was. I was determined to

show that I could eat a lot so I loaded up my plate even though I have been feeling sick since lunch. We then walked back past everyone and sat down. I couldn't stomach the food and Alexia was kind enough to finish my plate.

While Alexia was finishing my plate two chickens were presented to the bride and groom. The bride took a plate of chicken to hand out to the groom's family and the groom got a plate to give the bride's family. As the groom was handing out chicken he began to walk back toward us. All I could think was "oh shit please not me, please not me." But of course, the chicken was given to us. Thankfully, Alexia was the only one with a plate so he gave it to her. I kept telling Alexia that we didn't deserve this treatment; that I wanted to eat with everyone else, that it wasn't my celebration. She tried to explain that because we left our families and what is comfortable to come to an unknown country where there has been war in order to help, we deserved the treatment. I again tried to explain how she is a better person because she is in her country working so hard to make it a better place; she is the hero, not us. Finally I gave up because I didn't want to seem disrespectful. The ceremony ended, we went home.



I still feel sick from eating so much. I ate all the foods that I believe made me sick the first time but I couldn't help it, I had to prove that we can eat as much as them and that we aren't different! I felt as though I was glowing the whole night and people kept looking. It was a ceremony I will never forget and still feel guilty for the treatment. I am a college student with loans, nothing more. I know that in America I am extremely fortunate, but not to the extent that people think of me here. Alexia was telling me that she heard Americans throw away food they do not finish. She was shocked when telling me this. The guilt returned and I explained that even though we don't need a lot of things, our culture sometimes is that of over-consumption. It hurt to tell her this as I was thinking of my 10 pairs of shoes back home. I know that guilt is not what I should be feeling the most, and that I should create change, make others

change, etc. etc. I doubt I can change any of you, but I can say that when forced to explain to a doctor who takes the bus and supports over 6 siblings and her son, that we throw away food, made my stomach hurt even more.

I'm exhausted. I know the people I am with are good, kind and giving; but I am not the best at tolerating others when I feel even slightly disrespected. It is something I will overcome but, for now, I am going to do my best at smiling, listening and taking time for myself because I need it badly. Tomorrow is a sleep-in day and I look forward to allowing my stomach some time to recover. I don't know what the point of this e-mail is. Right now it's being used as a journal because my thoughts are everywhere. *Amahoro.*



Saturday, July 14, 2007 - Raw Joy...a Wedding

I have decided that my wedding — one day in the far, far future — will be somewhat Burundian style. The amount of joy that the people have during these ceremonies is amazing! You start at the church with singing and then children come in dancing followed by the groom and bride. After they exchange vows they sit on a couch and listen as the priest gives a speech. Then the children dance again as everyone sings. Fiston played the guitar, Febrice the drums, Desire was singing...it was wonderful! After the church we loaded up 9 young children and a few adults in the USAID truck that was bought for THARS. While driving to the "lover's tree" we sang: "Our God is an Awesome God" in Kirundi with all the children helping us. At the tree, we got out for about two seconds because there were over 10 other weddings that decided to go there at that time. Many people did not get the chance to marry during the war so now weddings happen often. We loaded back in and drove to the lake where they take pictures. We waited in the truck while Charles went to see how things were going. Then we rode to the reception hall joining many people to for the bride and groom to come. The two "fathers" gave final speeches and Fanta [soda pop] was handed out to the crowd. There were some teenage girls that danced a Rwandan dance, and many people were singing. There were speeches of what gifts were being given. Rice,

milk, goats, sugar, rent money and blessings were among the gifts. I noticed that there were many single men about my age and when I asked Alexia I found out that most were rebel fighters for FDD but are now soldiers. You can tell because they say that the couple and them "worked" together. There was even another woman rebel fighter. It is one thing to read about FDD, to know of the war, of the rebel fighters, it is another thing to be laughing and singing with them! It was AMAZING. At the end of the reception there is another little ceremony that must be done so that the two may work and not have to spend their first three months at home. This was done by a speech and A LOT of dancing and singing. It was wonderful. At the end everyone was dancing and Mateo [a young workcamper, also from California] was joking around

trying to copy Desire who was out on the dance floor. The camera crew caught him dancing and shined the bright light on him. He just laughed and went out with everyone else to dance. Chris joined in as well. Ok, ok, I could have too, but I'm still not that good about my dancing skills. When I was sitting with Alexia, a gentleman came up and was going to take my picture so I dragged her in it. We have decided she is a black *mzungu* and I am a white Burundian. While the *mzungu* were dancing everyone was so happy, we were all cheering and laughing and clapping. Though the wedding took over six hours it was well worth it. I am gaining so much just by the joy that keeps coming my way. *Amahoro.*

Saturday, 21 July 2007 – Dinner

As time draws closer to the end of this trip I begin to get nervous. I don't want to leave. I know that I must go home, that there are people and other responsibilities to attend to, but that doesn't make it any easier. This is not an experience to tuck away in some box with photos. There is no moving on. How do you move on from friends? I am leaving real people, not words in a book or some television show. I will never be able to express the kindness of those who have helped me. The stories that I have been told will never sound the same when I tell them. I want to tell all of you about the crazy dinner we had last night and how we were expecting ten people and ended up with seventeen. I cooked from 10 am to 6 pm and still didn't have enough food. I was so desperate that I pulled out the bag of beef jerky I had

in my luggage and served it on the side. But all that doesn't matter. What matters are the speeches that Marcelline, Elie and Alexia gave. The gratitude that Alexia expressed, and the need of telling their stories to Americans that Elie stressed, hit hard. The fact that Marcelline fasted for two days so that we would have a safe journey home: it's overwhelming. No longer does it matter what I want and need; I know where my heart is, where it will always be. I cannot walk away. The fact that everyone kept saying "sorry" to me as if it was their fault I sprained my ankle playing soccer; how Desire came up from his work to see how I was doing. Even the people that live around our home ask me in Kirundi how my foot is, I smile and give a thumbs up and hobble away. Without knowing the same language we communicate.

I want to tell one story that has been happening over the past five days but don't think I can do it justice. Perhaps I will send it later, right now it is too strong, too powerful to put in words. I'm sorry to mention it and then not share, but hopefully soon I will find the right words. I know I will come back here, I know that I must. Febrice has already told me that I will cook for his wedding party and Anita has invited me to hers in December. I am going to leave this e-mail at that because I can't find anything that I will express in its true form. All I know is that there is no such thing as moving on from an experience like this...not for me. *Amahoro*



Sunday, 22 July 2007 - Joyful's Child

Instead of trying to explain everything, which could be boring to many and take a long time, I will try to do it in snap shots; little situations that have an impact on me. We attended church today in Kamenge because we all believe that since it's where we work, where our friends attend church and has some of the best music, it is a good choice for us. It is a free concert for me. There is maybe forty-five minutes of actual talking and the other two hours and fifteen minutes is all singing done by different groups — university students, mothers, Sunday school kids, youth groups, and so on. The past two Sundays a woman named Joyful has translated for us. Even with translation I don't understand a lot. Today had something to do with men cheating on wives and how to endure and forgive, but I could be wrong. Joyful has a one month old that is held by someone through most of the service but toward the end she brings the baby over to where we sit. The first time I held her she wiggled a little but was always smiling. This time Joyful didn't hesitate to hand her to me and the little girl fell asleep instantly. At any given time there are over ten people staring at us so you have to be aware of what you are doing. I noticed today that many men kept looking at me with the baby. I think they aren't used to seeing an *mzungu* comfortably holding a child for over an hour. Or maybe they are touched, or...I am not a mind reader so all my assumptions could be wrong. All I know is that I feel comfortable and happy when holding the baby. I don't mind everyone staring at me because I am proud that the child can fall asleep in my arms. The music is amazing and people are so joyful with dancing and moving and clapping. You can't help but smile. We thought that today my ankle would be ok without a wrap but it swelled up again so now I have it in an ace bandage. At first the swelling was on the right side, then it went down a little and bruised up, now the swelling is on the left side of my foot. There is a possibility that the bone moved when I hurt myself and now it is moving back, or away or...just like the mind reader, I'm not a doctor. We're going to give it a day before anything is guessed. But I can tell you this much, there is no way I am staying home tomorrow. I will sit at the clinic and do nothing, but I am not staying at the house for one more day; not going to happen. Marcy, an EMT, made a splint out of some wood and a torn up t-shirt that we'll try tomorrow. I have already explained to the group that I will not stay at home and whether anyone likes it or not, I am getting out of this compound. I want to be with my friends. I want to apologize if my last e-mail was a little sad. I didn't mean for it to come off as that or to assume that none of you understand. All of you know me in one way or another and I believe that maybe these stories can do something. I don't know what, but hopefully something. Just a warning, it only will take \$9,000 to complete the church in Kamenge and with

over 700 people spilling out of the doors and standing outside looking through windows, I may take on the challenge. I don't know how, but I know that Kamenge needs the church and the power of the church member's faith is unbelievable. I may be sending out some more letters in the coming year...
Amahoro

Saturday, July 28, 2007 - and then there was One

Time is nearing the end, three out of the five Western team members leave today. John leaves tomorrow; and then, on Thursday, that last *mzungu* gets on a plane. Yesterday we had a small celebration at the clinic where a few people gave speeches and we were presented with gifts. The women got a small basket and the men got a drum. The back room is still not completed and I have arranged with Alexia to continue to work next week. I know the extra days are mine to do what I'd like to do...but if I work I get to continue to spend time with my friends. Samuel told me he was going to call my parents and tell them I am not allowed to go home. We all went to the university that evening and then to the beach. The food from lunch went right through me and I had to stay home while the others went to Alexia's sister's home for dinner. I fell asleep around 7:30 pm and didn't wake up until 6:20 am: a good long sleep. There is a wedding that I will attend today and then church tomorrow. Hopefully, since it will be my third time at the Kamenge church, I won't have to present myself in front of 700 people again...but I have a feeling I will.

Up-country was wonderful and I had a lot of fun being in a bus all day with Fiston, Alexia, Febrice, Marcelline, Anita, Samuel, Fidel, Marcelline's daughter, Desire, three others I don't know and the *mzungu*. We saw an albino boy and all the locals (not the ones in the bus) were teasing him saying he looks like the *mzungu*. The kid only wanted to sell some onions. I stepped in and pointed to myself saying, "ego *mzungu*" and then pointed to him, "*oyah mzungu*, Burundian." He smiled and even though it didn't stop the teasing I think we came to an agreement. I noticed that there are pine trees just like in America and when I told Anita that we cut them down for Christmas she said they do the same thing. There were some FNL rebels on the side of the road but they were chatting with locals and didn't mind us. We passed a bus full of white people and yelled *mzungu*...for some reason that joke is lost on most white people. I don't find it as offensive any more, just what is said. If nothing else I tease the locals we're with and hold out my hand saying "*mzungu bonbon?*" But if you are in a group of twenty white people in a bus with balloons on it...how could we resist?

The following day, Mateo, Marcy and I were at a market near the embassy and there were way too many white people. I was negotiating a price with a man and had taken him from 5,000 down to 1,500 (5 dollars to 1.50). My goal was 1,000 and I kept telling him that when an old woman decided it was necessary to tell me, "you know that's only a dollar." She completely ruined my chance to get the price and with all the white people there was no way we could get the prices to a decent rate. I was uncomfortable around all the other *mzungu* and asked the others if we could leave and come back at another time. We all agreed to do so but before we could leave a man told us, "You know there is a better market near by." We asked where and he said "oh, I don't know, the taxi driver will be taking us tomorrow." I didn't say anything and was hoping we'd leave but he pressed on, "Yes, we're here to teach a local school for two weeks." It is a good thing that he has come to teach...but even my 6 weeks is too short and he had this air of "helping the poor Africans" that was upsetting to me. I didn't want to be around him or what he represented which was a kind of superiority. In a way I'm glad to have met him because he is the example of what I NEVER want to be. On Monday I will be going with some people to see a movie which is only \$1 per person so I decided that six of us would go, on me. I presented it as a thank-you for all the help they've given me. *Amahoro*

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 - Saying Goodbye

How do I say good bye to the children of Kamenge; or to the work crew at the clinic? How do I express in words that they have changed my life. Tomorrow is my last day to work at the clinic and I can't hold back the tears thinking that I won't see my friends for so long. How do I tell the little girl that almost tackles me everyday with a hug around the legs that in two days I won't be there for her to hug any more? To Jolina and Eliza that patty-cake will have to be put on hold for a year. Today, when I was walking through Kamenge to the clinic, a little boy no older than five walked up to me and grabbed my hand. We walked to the clinic together. I gave him a hug and he played in the sand. This is the same little boy that a week ago was being a bully to other children and wouldn't shake my hand. After a few interventions on my part, for the children being teased by him, he stopped and we regarded each other in a mutual respect. Today he held my hand. There was no question when he approached. It was as if this was how it was supposed to be. I don't want to go; I don't want to leave all the amazing people. It's not to say I won't meet other great people or that I don't have a wonderful family and friends waiting for me at home; this is something different, almost unexplainable. I feel comfortable saying "*amahoro*" to everyone in the morning and shaking their hands. It's habit to open the gate for Martin and pull one of the water jugs off his bike to put in the barrel. I have even acquired a taste for Coke and Fanta.. What will I do without tea at dinner and cold showers? How will I react to seeing a lot of white people when for six weeks I have seen maybe fifteen? What stories will I share; will people be willing to listen to them or just

disregard them because I talk too much? I have never felt more love from people that have known me for such a short period of time. They are constantly watching and checking to make sure everything is alright. The gratitude I have toward the community here is so large; I may never be able to repay their generosity. Even Alexander, one of the workers, called me by Whinee; it was the first time he has ever called me by my name. Arcade came back from visiting his family, came upstairs, gave me a hug and spoke a little English — more than I had heard him say for over a month. He calls me "sister whinee" and it makes me so happy. This is the beginning of something for me. I don't know what, I don't know how, but something has started. I will never leave my friends and with their determination in Burundi and mine in America, we can achieve something great. *Amahoro, Murakoze* (thank you all).

Mon, 06 Aug 2007 -

In my First Home, Gone from my Second Home

I'm in the United States and slowly getting back into the "other world." I'm in Georgia with my dear friend Becca and her children. All of her family lives nearby and it's nice to see friendly people because after my flights I was wondering about many Americans I was waiting four hours for my flight in Washington, DC: no one said "hello," no one sat near me, and people just ignored me when I tried to make eye-contact or to say good morning. I saw people who were African American and I wanted to go sit near them because it felt comfortable. Then I realized that they didn't want me near them...no one around did. It was hard; the entire trip from Burundi I wanted to turn around and find a flight back ASAP. I miss everyone terribly. But I miss everyone in America just as much.

The support and love that all of you have given me has not gone unnoticed and I am forever in your debt because of it. I am more determined than ever to continue my experience of Burundi and will spend more of my life building the relationships I made there. I'm not sure how to express everything that I have gone through or if I will accomplish what Burundians wish me to do. During the entire trip people kept saying, "Tell your family, friends and boyfriend that we are thankful for allowing you to come and please tell them of our country. Forgive the bad and the unfortunate that have happened, bring home the good of Burundi."

What they did not realize was that the bad of the country makes the good a hundred times more powerful because it exists. Yes, the country and its people have changed my life. I don't know how, I may never know. But it isn't over, the country has more to give and to create. I will be in California on Thursday. Thank you again for everything; be prepared for a few more trips to the country with more e-mails to accompany them. *Amahoro*.



"How do I say good bye to the children of Kamenge; or to the work crew at the clinic? How do I express in words that they have changed my life. Tomorrow is my last day to work at the clinic and I can't hold back the tears thinking that I won't see my friends for so long. How do I tell the little girl that almost tackles me veryday with a hug around the legs that in two days I won't be there for her to hug any more?"

Information on AGLI Workcamps

The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) sponsors four or five workcamp each year in Rwanda, Burundi, and Kenya. Workcamps run from the end of June through July with a maximum of thirty international participants. Descriptions of each workcamp (including costs), the application, and other information can be found at www.aglionline.org. Please direct any questions you may have about the workcamps to AGLI's Program Manager, Dawn Rubbert, via dawn@aglionline.org.



The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams strengthens, supports, and promotes peace activities at the grassroots level in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). To this end, AGLI responds to requests from local religious and non-governmental organizations that focus on conflict management, peace building, trauma healing, and reconciliation. AGLI sponsors Peace Teams composed of members from local partners and the international community.

Visit AGLI's website at www.aglionline.org

For further information on AGLI workcamps please contact:

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