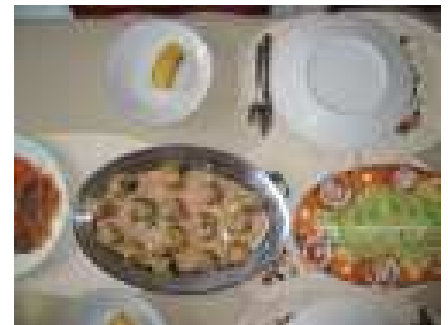


The Very Beginning: Year One 2008 - 2009

In 2005, 25 members of Friendship Force of Edmonton and Area (FFEA) travelled to Burundi on an outbound, where they were hosted by the newly formed Friendship Force of Burundi. Jean Marie Bizimana organized a FF club in Burundi hoping to make connections with English speaking countries because he wanted to open an English school in Bujumbura, Burundi. After meeting Diana McIntyre, FFEA president, Jean Marie asked her to please send teachers from Alberta to bring their curriculum and help him open an English school. Carol Bahry and her husband, Kevan Hanlen and Barbara Olynyk were recruited. A sea container was rented and filled with library books, student and teacher desks, a few computers, a printer, filing cabinets, sports equipment, many learning materials and a fridge. The sea container left for Burundi with the intent of arriving prior to the volunteers in August. Before the departure of the volunteers, FF of Burundi came to Edmonton on an inbound and took 8 suitcases of educational materials back with them. The remaining materials were brought by the volunteers who each traveled with the maximum weight of 100 pounds - which left little room for personal belongings.

When they arrived the last week of August, Kevan and Carol were met by ten smiling Burundians dressed in their finest traditional clothing and bearing flowers and warm hugs. Expecting to live in grass huts, Kevan and Carol were amazed by their accommodations. At the volunteer home, Kevan and Carol were amazed at their accommodations: a beautiful gated house with an indoor washroom, separate bedrooms, hot water for showers a beautiful garden as well as a full time cook and housekeeper!



Burundi English School was to be housed in a rented and abandoned seminary which had been damaged in an earthquake. But the rooms were decent sized for classrooms and there were indoor washrooms. Each washroom had one bar of soap and one towel. The team got to work wiring and painting the classrooms, creating blackboards from plywood covered with black paint, cleaning and organizing three classrooms (playschool, kindergarten and Grade one), a teacher workroom, a lunch room and an office. The courtyards had been filled with sand for the children to play in.

The week before school opening, six candidates were interviewed to fill three teaching positions. Three of them could not understand the questions being asked in English. We were happy to hire the three who were able to participate in the interview. We were so fortunate to have one candidate who taught in the English Montessori School in Bujumbura. The school was advertised on National television with Carol being interviewed. The teacher salaries were

bargained with a board member, Carol and the three hired teachers. Finally, the salary decided upon was 150,000 BFU per month. (The kindergarten teacher said her apartment cost 50,000 BFU per month.)

Barb Olynyk arrived the day before school opening to mentor in Grade one. Carol and Barb picked some **wild flowers to adorn the teachers' desks** and made a welcome sign in English, French and Kurundi. On the first day of school, thirteen students registered: 5 in Gr. 1, 5 in Kindergarten and 3 in playschool).



Barb had just retired from being a resource facilitator in primary, so she brought programs like Animated Literacy, Shared Reading and writing and reading intervention strategies. The first sounds taught were p, u, o, and m. The first week was spent on the theme of “Pup” teaching the children how to draw a pup and learning the parts of the pup. We were lucky that about 20 stuffed puppies had been sent in the container. We sang the song, “The Tail on the Pup...went round and round”. We read books about puppies. Kevan **popped popcorn** on the open brazier for the children to reinforce the “p” sound ... pop, pop, pop. They had no idea how popcorn was made. They were amazed.

Everything we did throughout our time there was based on monthly themes (colors, body, family,) We taught the English verbs through total physical response (I sit, I stand, I reach up, I bend down, I turn around). With each command, the teacher modeled the words and the actions. Then the students repeated. At the end, for mastery, the student heard the command and had to respond independently. The following verbs were then introduced: “I pick up, I put down, I touch, I point.” In between we taught the names of concrete objects, like their desk supplies and furniture which would be used in daily learning. Students were physically and vocally engaged all the time.

By week four, we were introducing the letter “M” and its sound, for which we had selected “mmmmm is for monkey”. To our surprise, **monkeys arrived** in the trees in the courtyard. We were able to introduce words like “jump, swing, run, walk, and climb.



We always selected action songs to go with the themes and the letters we were learning. The children LOVED to sing! They sang the songs while they played in the courtyard during recess. The sand filled courtyards were perfect for children to play because we had sent many yogurt containers in the container. We were asked to teach the children to play because we were told they didn't know how.

The children loved to play in the sand with those containers. They built roads and castles and pretended the containers were cars and they drove them on the roads. A lot of toys were sent in the container. These were used in the playschool and kindergarten stations and for recess play. Soccerballs didn't last long. Each courtyard had an avocado tree which provided shade for the children to play under.



The first parent meeting was held about 5:00 and just when we went into the classrooms for the teachers to tell the parents about our program, the power went out, leaving us in the dark. Luckily everybody had cell phones which were used for light. Candles were lit and the meeting continued.





We reviewed the parent, student and teacher handbooks we had brought, the schedules, the teacher contracts, the hours of operation, the yearly schedule, and the teacher planning time.

School hours went from 8:00-Noon and 1:00-2:30. Everyday after school, we met with the teachers and taught them to plan lessons for the next day. We modeled teaching strategies, active participation, shared reading and writing and then watched the teachers as they presented their lessons, and demonstrated their understanding of lesson planning and presentation.

We showed the teachers how to level books using the Fontas and Pinnell leveling system. Children took books home every evening to read to their parents. This helped their families learn English as well. We insisted on English only at school.

Children and staff (teachers, secretary, and security) were provided with a hot meal at lunch prepared by the same cook that cooked for us at home. This usually consisted of rice, beans and vegetables prepared outside and cooked on a brazier. The groceries were bought fresh every morning. At recess the children and staff got tea with milk and a dough bun. The tea was served in cups which were washed and reused.



Each day began with an assembly where everybody gathered in the largest room and later the courtyard. After the children and staff sang the Burundi National Anthem a review of letters, numbers and songs followed. We all enjoyed the ghetto blaster and CDs we had brought from Canada.

Report cards were the electronic version from Edmonton Catholic Schools. Because the power went out often, it was often difficult to work on them. Thankfully we only had five to do. The five students were all boys with a variety of learning styles. Some caught on very quickly and excelled. Some struggled but were determined. Whenever possible, we provided experiences to help them grasp concepts.

At the end of our school day, about 4:00, we were driven home by a board member and we enjoyed a bottle of Primus beer on the patio. The beer cost less than a dollar and was one litre in size so the ladies would split a bottle.

At 6:00 the sun set and the mosquitoes came out. By then supper had been prepared by our cook and we went inside to enjoy a very hearty meal of rice, frits, salad, beans, and meat always beautifully arranged on serving plates. The meat was usually quite tough so we discouraged our hosts from spending money on meat. The fish



was awesome though. The climate of Burundi supports a large variety of fruits and vegetables. After supper, we often played cards, read or worked on schoolwork if the power was on. There was a television but there wasn't much in English and, of course, it required electricity, which was unpredictable.

Jean Marie, the Chairman of the Burundi English School Board and Gideon, another founder of BES, were very good about taking us out on the weekend. We either went to the beach on Lake Tanganyika, the second deepest lake in the world or we attended concerts of dancing and drumming, which were fascinating. We even attended a wedding and a baptism. Jean Marie took us "up country" to Gitega where he was raised. The trip was VERY interesting because we got to see life in the villages and in the hills. Burundi is known as the land of a thousand hills and they farm all of the hills. There is very little uncultivated land in Burundi. They burn wood and charcoal so the air always looks smoky. The people dress very traditionally in bright colored dresses and headdresses.

