

# TALES FROM THE HILLS

THOUGHTS, STORIES, AND UPDATES FROM MY YEAR OF SERVICE IN RWANDA

## FAMILY BONDING

I've been living with my host family now for two months. And what a ride it has been! We spend a lot of time together talking, laughing, playing games, cooking, and watching movies. I am still adjusting to Rwanda family life—for example, it is totally weird to need alone time here. As an extrovert, I still need time alone to relax, write, read and the only way I can ensure undisturbed time is if I decide to take a nap. So, on more than a few occasions, I escape to my room and watch a movie in English or read a few chapters of my book. I have told my host family that I don't always sleep when I hide in my room, but we now have a running joke that whenever I emerge from my solitary sanctuary someone will say "Mwaramutse, wasinziriye neza?" (Good morning, did you sleep well?), even when it is 6pm.

Basically, everything in Rwanda is an adjustment for me. But I know my family is also adjusting to having a loud, laughing, American in their home. For instance, I never eat as much as a Rwandan can eat, nor as quickly. After I finish one heaping plate of potatoes, beans, rice, and dodo (a usually stewed, green, leafy, bitter, veg; like chard) I am full. And I know there is at least one cup of milk tea waiting for me at the end of every meal to further fill me up. I think Mama Haleluya, Jonathan, Joshua, and Halelu take turns each night ordering me to eat more or silently, and not so subtly, inching the bowls closer to me. Most of the time I try for seconds, but I always pass on thirds.

One night after dinner, my eyes were especially tired, but I was not ready to sleep yet. I decided to take out my contacts and put on my glasses for the rest of the evening. As I announced that I would go put my glasses on, my family raised concerns about my eyes—when do you have to wear glasses? Can you see me now without glasses? Now, no one in Gicumbi wears contact lenses, let alone has ever seen someone who wears them, so when I told them I have a tiny piece of plastic



Above: Pastor Caleb and I posing in a neighbor's beautiful garden before enjoying a visit complete with milk tea and freshly made omelets!

Below: Mama Haleluya and I cooking dinner. I oversaw making the vegetables—green beans, carrots, green pepper, onion, and tomato.



on my eyeball that allows me to see, they stared at me in disbelief. I quick washed my hands and removed one contact for them. Haleluya, who is 21 years old, literally screamed. Mama Haleluya said Yebabawe (Oh my God). Pastor and the boys stood, mouths gaping. Apparently, they thought I was taking my whole eyeball out...



Left: Haleluya and I sitting on a small hill in our front yard after a long photo shoot. We take lots of pictures in this house!

Middle: Jonathan and I on a walk on a perfect sunny day. The terraced fields are popular in this region of Rwanda because of all the hills.

Right: Joshua and I (pretending to be super cold) on the day it hailed here. Neither of us are sure what Mama H is doing here...

## WHAT I'M DOING

I knew this year would push me. I just assumed the work I would be doing would provide a schedule and structure. My primary job right now in Gicumbi is to accompany. If you're familiar with YAGM this is one of our buzz words we heard often at orientation. It means to walk alongside, learn from and teach, share and respect culture as equals. *This* has been the past two months with my community.

The school I where I will teach English does not start a new year until January. They could not use me in the final months of the school year, so since I arrived in September, the Kageyo Parish has been



Above: This is a "parent" meeting hosted in the yard on the side of our house. Evangelist Gad, Pastor Caleb's right hand man, led the discussion. The folks in this picture are parents of children who attend Saturday morning classes and sing in the choir on Sundays.





Left: This is my group of P3 and P4 (third and fourth grade) students at the church on Saturday morning. We were learning the names of colors.



Right: Half of the same group of kiddos—P1 and P2 in the background. The students played memory with the cards I made. They matched the color with the color name.

getting my full attention. I have been helping where I am needed, where the church asks me to be. I have visited sick church members, I have helped plant peas (see my post on the YAGM Rwanda Facebook page!) and I have attended church community meetings. I just started fixing a set of desktop computers

the church has access to in the building we rent to worship in. Computer skills classes will start soon!

I've been teaching English for the church too. Every Saturday, children in primary school come to the church for extra lessons and lunch. They practice mathematics and English. They learn songs and sing them as part of the children's choir on Sundays. Two volunteers who are church members and myself break the group up by grade and lead them in lessons for a few hours. I've reviewed and taught basic greetings, colors, and dates so far. We play games together. I get a chance to practice my Kinyarwanda with over 50 helpful little teachers. When I get to church on Sunday, they rush to greet me. Sometimes a few come over to Pastor's home and we play cards, monkey in the middle, or checkers.

It is not enough to keep me busy like I am used to, but I am learning the names and faces of the community I live in and everyday it starts to feel more like home.



Above: On a nice Saturday morning, the children will walk over the Pastor Caleb's house for lunch. Halleluya, Mama H, and some other women from church prepare lunch. This is the P5 and P6 group of students enjoying porridge, hard boiled eggs, and fresh bread for lunch.



## DEEP, PARTING THOUGHTS

I don't always find God in church, especially here. Going to church in Rwanda is hard. I don't understand most of what is happening. I sing the songs, but the lyrics are lost on me. The sermons are long, and the message is often shouted at us, to really drive the point home. But, it alienates me, a person who knows a gentler, less yell-y, church.

I've been relying on other ways to feel close to God. Watching the sunset over the hills, painting the sky in pink and orange makes me feel close to God. Listening to the children's choir sing and dance with the biggest smiles makes me feel close to God. Getting letters and emails from home reminding me of the power of prayer and community makes me feel close to God. Watching my host family interact and love each other makes me feel close to God.

So, I'll ask you. And maybe it's not 'God' for you; maybe it's the universe, the divine, the majesty of nature, the kindness of others, fate, the wonder of science. I'm curious-- where and when do you see God? What makes you feel close to God?

With love,  
Hope

If you want to read more stories about my life in Rwanda, my blog: <https://hopeinrwanda.com/>

If you want to contribute to my year of service, my donor page:  
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