

Partnerships for Health in a Rwandan Genocide Survivors Village: The Rwanda Health and Healing Project and *Barefoot Artists*

In 2005, Staff from Jefferson was invited to travel Rwanda to work with Lily Yeh, the founder of the Village of Arts and Humanities in Lower North Philadelphia and a partner organization, *Barefoot Artists*. These organizations share the mission to “work with poor communities around the globe to help people heal and thrive through self expression and action.” The organization has completed numerous community-based art and development projects across the globe.

The organization’s initial project in Rwanda was the Rwanda Healing Project, a two-year, multi-dimensional art project that expands the boundaries of art as a vehicle for social change. The project consisted of two simultaneous and complementary programs, The Survivors Village Transformation and The Genocide Memorial Park. The Survivors Village Transformation Project honors the living by equipping surviving family members with economic resources and tools to heal, learn skills, and take actions to better their lives. Located in Rugerero (Northwest Rwanda), these projects aim to engage 50 houses of 100 families with 190 children. Of these households, 67 are headed by females and eight are male-headed. Government construction of the Village began in 1997 to provide housing for people rendered homeless during the 1994 genocide.

In October of 2005, Thomas Jefferson University (TJU) faculty and a team of Jefferson medical students, as a component of *Jeff Health* (Helping Africans Link to Health), began working with Barefoot Artists.

In June of 2006, with support from the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, two faculty, three medical students and one public health nursing student traveled to Rwanda begin a comprehensive community health assessment. The goals of this assessment were three-fold; 1) to document the needs of community members through key informant interviews and focus groups, 2) to evaluate and document the health resources currently available through site visits and semi-structured interviewing of established organizations, and 3) to better understand health needs in context of the unique social and political history of Rwanda.

Once in Rwanda, the Jefferson team developed a Health and Hygiene Train-the-Trainer program, which included an environmental walk and training on hand washing and disease transmission. They also organized a health fair with the Village and managed to collect heights and weights on 150+ children as part of an initial Nutrition Assessment.

A Jefferson group returned in early April 2007 to follow-up on the nutrition assessment/activities and to determine next steps for collaboration, including meeting with faculty and students from the Rwandan School of Medicine. In June 2007, seven Jefferson medical students completed a nutritional assessment in the entire Village, provided HIV/AIDS education and linked the Village to Rwandan medical students as a component of the Rwanda Village Concept Project, an international student-run project, with a mission to improve the living

standards in a Rwandan community by using simple and low cost methods and to develop the capabilities of students in participatory development work.

Since the initial work, 35 TJU medical, nursing and public health students have traveled to Rugerero focusing on health education and promotion (elder care, HIV/AIDS, prenatal care, family planning, and nutrition), through a train the trainer program with the Village Health Association. Jeff HEALTH has also partnered with the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of Engineers Without Borders, who have repaired a majority of the latrines and septic systems in the Village.

The Jefferson medical students also began a partnership/exchange with Rwandan medical students. The exchange allows these students to receive additional training in the United States while Jefferson students participate in clinical clerkships in the National University of Rwanda’s Medical School in Butare, Rwanda. To date, nine Rwandan students have been on Jefferson’s campus for two months. In 2009, Jeff HEALTH began duplicating its programs in an additional Village – Akarambe.

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