

# And the days go round

After a year in Rwanda, a former principal from Williams Lake, reflects on his typical and not so typical days as head of a teacher/parent training program in Kigali.

In the past, I have participated in the BCPVPA Picture Day. I have spent the day chronicling each walk through the school hallways, each phone call to frustrated parents, each chat with a teacher, and each clean-up in the boys' change room because the custodian will not be in until noon. At the end of the day, as I reflect, I will wonder if this day really was a typical day.

The truth is, if you are a principal or vice-principal, there is no typical day. Sure, there are many routine activities from one day or week to the next, but there is also going to be something new and, if not extraordinary, at least out-of-the-ordinary.

Life as the Program Director for a teacher and parent training program for a small NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) in Kigali, Rwanda is very different than life as a principal or vice-principal back home in Williams Lake, yet there are many commonalities too. Have you ever sat down at the dinner table at the end of a busy school day, and your spouse asks you what you



did all day? You stammer, and then only one or two things spring to mind. All you know is that you didn't do *any* of the things you had planned to do. Life is like that here too, except instead of student conferences, equipment repairs, and required district documents, my time can be taken up with emails to prospective volunteers, writing assignments for the Wellspring website, and meeting with partners and stakeholders.

Amongst those activities mentioned already, I have also cre-

ated the first Human Resources manual for Wellspring employees here in Rwanda. While I have been a principal and vice-principal for ten years and a staff rep for four years before that, it has been a challenge wading through the labour laws of a developing country and the past practices of a fairly new NGO.

I am also dedicating some of my time to developing leadership training materials for the head teachers and deputy head teachers (the equivalent of principals

and vice-principals) with whom we work. I have been greatly aided in this process through referencing the BCPVPA's *Leadership Standards for Principals and Vice-Principals in British Columbia* and by meeting a new friend, John Morefield. John and I have never met in person, but I "found" him one day when I googled "school leadership developing country." John, a former principal and university professor from Seattle, has led a World Bank funded national project for school director leadership training in Cambodia and spent the past five years developing curriculum, training a corps of 70 trainers and conducting hundreds of leadership workshops for school directors.

His leadership training curriculum is in English and the Khmer language, and the curriculum itself has traveled to Vietnam, Laos, China, Afghanistan, and now to Africa. In February, via snail mail, the curriculum arrived in Rwanda on a CD wrapped in a tea towel and crammed snugly into a brown envelope. As a solid foundation for a leadership training program, John's curriculum has been pure gold. As I adapt relevant parts of the curriculum and handouts, our teacher trainers help me with making information culturally appropriate and in all of the translation into Kinyarwanda.

As I develop the leadership course, I am often reminded that although the head teachers and I seem to have so little in common, many daily routines and challenges are not vastly different. Decentralization has downloaded more responsibilities, administrative tasks often distract from the more important business of instructional leadership, and many parents do little to support the education of their children. Sound vaguely familiar?

## A Typical Day



All that said, there are days that seem to flow, more or less, according to a dynamic plan ... Gilbert is already waiting for me as I walk out to the van just after 7 o'clock in the morning. I ask him if David will be meeting us here too since David also lives nearby. He quickly reaches David on his cell phone and determines that he is already waiting at Gishushu with some of the other teacher trainers.

Within a couple of minutes, we are in the busy traffic heading to our initial pick-up point. Before reaching the first major intersection three blocks away, I have already been passed and cut off by a number of impatient drivers. There is technically only one lane with a wide shoulder on each side of this street, but at this time of the morning, the drivers have created three lanes heading the direction I am heading with one narrow lane for the traffic coming toward us. There is a reason we often say that traffic rules are merely suggestions in Rwanda.

As we round the corner at Gishushu – major intersections are given names here – six other trainers are waiting in a group, each one dressed professionally. They smile as we greet each other with a friendly "Mwara-

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Editor

Richard Williams

mutse,” good morning. I welcome them to “Mark’s Matatu,” and they laugh because the matutus or taxivans that they normally ride in are filled with at least 19 commuters. From the passenger seat, Gilbert jokes that today they will be treated as VIPs with so few riders in the 12-passenger van. Theogene, Benigne, David, Mary, Mercy and Desire climb aboard, and with a curious but necessary mix of both aggressive and defensive driving, I pull back out into the morning chaos.

Ten minutes later, we have picked up Ernest at Kinamba, Beatrice at the petrol station near Nyabugogo, and Ladislas at the first taxi stop on the way up the hill to Kabusunzu. Even without the trainers’ help, I am confident after being here for a year that I could have successfully navigated my way from one side of Kigali to the other, picking up each trainer at the predetermined meeting spots.

As we drive the remaining ten minutes to the school, the trainers talk about their weekends in a mix of Kinyarwanda, French and English. I am fairly certain the odd English word is thrown in for my benefit as my level of French is *petite peu*, and my level of Kinyarwanda is lower still. Here, many people are fairly fluent in two or three languages. Fortunately for me, the trainers are all fluent in English after their two years of working at Wellspring, so communicating with them is never an issue. Even so, when it comes to recalling weekend events, most revert to their mother tongue.

As we pull into the Kabusunzu government school, Ernest is calling out the names of trainers two at a time. With each couple, he also calls out the first name of a Kabusunzu teacher. These will be the first classroom observations of the day, and Ernest, who has just rotated back

into the trainer leader position for this school district, has done his homework and is well-organized.

If only, it was that simple.

Once Ernest has greeted the headmistress, the trainers head to their first appointments. As David and Mary enter the first classroom, the teacher reports to them that he is administering exams all day and will not be able to be observed today. Two other trainers are told that a teacher does not have a scheduled class until 10:20 am.

While the headmistress and the teachers have been aware of these observations for a month and were reminded of them last week, there will be many other glitches as the day moves forward. Over the course of the next three days, most of the teachers will have been observed, and follow-up conversations will have been held. Those who are most reluctant will continue to find excuses, and it will only be with the support of the headmistress that we will have any level of success with these resisters. This headmistress is new to her position this year, so we are unable to accurately gauge how much support she will provide.

Because I must leave the van for an hour, I pay one of the maintenance workers to guard it. I show him five 100 franc coins (approximately 85¢ Canadian) and point to my van. While he speaks no English, he and I have danced this dance before, so we are able to communicate through pointing and nodding. He is happy to be able to supplement his income today, and because I am paying him a much higher hourly rate than he is accustomed to, he will likely stay close to the van and ignore some of his other duties until I return. He never seems to be overly busy when we are here, so my guilt is assuaged.

The lesson I observe today is a math lesson in a Primary 4 (Grade 4) class. As a math lesson often can, the objective has more to do with understanding terminology and less to do with arithmetic or computation. Because the terminology is in a foreign language (in this case, English), both teacher and students seem to be sailing into uncharted waters. The lesson is certainly less than awe-inspiring, and I am told by Gilbert and Theogene after the lesson that this teacher did not attend our recent workshop and therefore



Desire (right) discusses a lesson observation with a teacher from Nduba.



did not include any group work in her lesson. Instead of a thorough critique of the teacher's lesson when the three of them sit down this afternoon, Gilbert and Theogene will help her to plan the next lesson, hoping to help the teacher to implement more active participation and the extension of cognitive skills and critical thinking.

After one lesson observation, I must head back to the office. Today, I am completing the final draft of the quarterly report. I will also be phoning each of the district education officers and others in the Ministry of Education to determine when I can visit them to deliver the report and have a chat. These calls or text messages will begin a game of tag which I have learned to dread. If I am lucky, a meeting date will be set, but I will be asked to phone back on the day of the meeting to determine an exact time and to remind the person that the meeting has indeed been scheduled. If I am not so fortunate, the person will ask me to call back on a certain day to ask again about availability. Still others will not respond to phone, text messages, or emails, and I may need to pick a day and go sit outside of their offices until they are able to give me ten minutes of their time.


Today I will also continue to type and edit the letters written by all of

our teacher and parenting trainers last week. Once completed, these letters will be emailed to Canada, read over by one of our Development Officers, beautified by our Communications Manager, and then mailed to all of the donors who are part of the *Support a Trainer* program. As Program Director, I am the main communications conduit between the teacher training program on the ground in Rwanda and the Canadian office that oversees the donor side of the operation.

This afternoon, I will have the pleasure of informing the leaders of many other educational NGOs based in Kigali that the website for the Rwanda Education NGO Coordination Platform ([www.rencp.org](http://www.rencp.org)) is now up and running. This past February, Wellspring joined a

fledgling group that has a mandate of coordinating the work of all organizations involved in the education sector here. It is a huge but necessary undertaking as there has been no functioning body to help reduce overlap, and more importantly, to help us learn from the expertise of others working in similar fields. While Wellspring is not large, we do feel that we have been influential in making this coordination get off the ground.

Before the afternoon is done, Ernest will call me to let me know when the trainers will be ready to be picked up. I will wind my way back through the streets of Kigali to find a much wearier group of educators at the end of their busy day. It is not every day that I drive the trainers to the government schools for their observations. Usually, they take public transport, a combination of matatu vans and motorcycle taxis. Still, it has been awhile since we have done observations, and Kabusunzu has presented some difficulties in the recent past, so I wanted to give moral support while also adding a more formal Wellspring presence at the school at the beginning of our three days here.

And so goes as typical a day as any in Kigali! 

Teacher trainer Ernest flashes his great smile.



Mark Thiessen, his wife Tracey, and family in Rwanda. Mark is on leave from the Cariboo-Chilcotin school district and is writing about his experiences in Rwanda for Adminfo readers. This is his third article and additional articles will be published as he continues his two-year commitment. The family's blog, can be found at <http://thewellspringfoundation.com/blogs/thiessens/>. Mark can also be reached at [mark@thewellspringfoundation.com](mailto:mark@thewellspringfoundation.com)