

A Rwandan experience

After 18 months in Rwanda, a BC educator and his family, abruptly return to Canada, but the experience has enriched the Thiessens and will shape the way they look at the world.

by Mark Thiessen



Mark addresses a class in a rural Rwandan primary school.

Looking back on it, I would have rather been Medevac'ed out of Rwanda in a helicopter. Two paramedics would have jumped out of the chopper with their heads ducked low to avoid the propeller as they rushed a stretcher to the waiting ambulance. There, they would have found their

patient on death's door, whisking him off to Kenya or South Africa or maybe, *just maybe*, to a jet that would take him home to Canada.

Alas, it was not to be. My family's early exit from our two-year sojourn to Kigali, Rwanda would be far less glamorous and hardly the stuff of a novel the

reader just can't put down.

Seventeen months into my stint as the Program Director for The Wellspring Foundation for Education, I woke up one November morning with a left eye that wouldn't stop tearing, was extremely sensitive to the sunlight sneaking through the curtains, and was more pain-



Mark and Dr. Piet at the Kabgayi Eye Unit in Gitarama, a day before returning home.

ful than any eye ailment I had ever experienced before. Over the next five weeks, I would see five ophthalmologists (half of the eye specialists in the entire country) and visit three hospitals and a medical clinic in two cities. I would also receive three different diagnoses as well as numerous other speculations.

Finally, I met ophthalmologist number five. His name was Dr. Piet, and he was a Belgian eye specialist working in Gitarama, an hour away from our home in Kigali. Dr. Piet was in the middle of a three-year contract in Rwanda, conducting mostly cataract surgeries for locals who

often walked many hours, sometimes even days, to see him. After a careful examination, Dr. Piet suspected that I may have contracted a parasite, but he had no way of conducting a lab test to confirm his suspicions. For a week, he treated a few of the symptoms, but nothing substantially changed. Two days after Christmas, my wife and I could no longer live with the uncertainty of a condition that could conceivably be worsening by the day without treatment.

A week later, I had returned to Canada on regularly scheduled flights with no emergency medical evacuation necessary. Upon seeing a corneal specialist in Vancouver and the appropriate lab tests finally being carried out, I was diagnosed with a rare affliction called *acanthamoeba keratitis*.

The *acanthamoeba* parasite is a single-celled organism that normally feeds on bacteria and

yeast. It does not usually need a host, but if it finds one, its appetite becomes voracious. Lucky for my parasitic friend, I was the perfect host. First, living in Rwanda, I likely gave the parasite many chances to stop by for a visit. Unclean water is generally where the parasite hangs out, so we could easily have had our first blind date (pun intended) in our bathroom shower, swimming in Lake Kivu, standing under a brown waterfall or even swimming at a local hotel swimming pool.

After that initial meeting, I remained very hospitable to my guest. Substandard contact lens care – wearing my daily wear lenses for too many days and not completely changing my solution everyday – allowed the parasite to create a comfortable home for itself. For good measure, once the intense pain and light sensitivity arrived on that fateful November morning, I made him feel even more at home by wearing my air travel blindfold, thereby ensuring my

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Editor

Richard Williams

visitor had a warm, moist and cozy existence.

Acanthamoeba was first established as a cause of human disease in the 1970s, and the parasite can cause three clinical syndromes, based on how the parasite gains entry into the human body: granulomatous amebic encephalitis or GAE (the brain), disseminated granulomatous amoebic disease (skin, sinus, and pulmonary infections), and acanthamoeba keratitis (the eye). Fortunately for me, the acanthamoeba parasite entered door number three. While acanthamoeba keratitis can be vision threatening, GAE is usually fatal (nearly 100% of the time). In none of my research have I found that the acanthamoeba in my eye could eat its way through

my eye and into my brain, so upon diagnosis, my wife and I were able to rest assured that I wouldn't be pushing up daisies anytime soon.

Some friends put it best when they commented on the irony of it: "With all your preparations, all the shots, and after a year and a half in Africa you didn't get malaria, you weren't attacked by a mountain gorilla or a lion, and you didn't succumb to a weird insect bite. No, you were felled by daily use contacts. That's not much of a scar to come back with and hope for any bragging rights."

With my diagnosis came the advice from my corneal specialist that I should not return to Rwanda. Instead, he prescribed a daily regimen of 34 eye drops

(four different medications) taken at least 15 minutes apart, including through the night. I had appointments every three to four days at the beginning so the parasite could be closely monitored. I was taking a plethora of eye drops, my specialist was becoming my new best friend, and most crushing, I was not going back to Rwanda.

Five weeks after my return, my wife and children followed me to Canada. While I spent the month in Vancouver close to my specialist, Tracey, with the help of my parents, packed up our lives in Rwanda. Expecting to spend another six months in Kigali, it was an emotional departure as the family said goodbye to colleagues and friends, many of whom we may never



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The Thiessen family is surrounded like celebrities as they check out a Wellspring construction project.

see again.

As difficult as the farewells were, the transition back to life in Canada was no easier ... especially in the middle of frozen February. It can be a bit of a shock to the system to come from 30 degrees above to 30 degrees below in the space of a few days.

A few months later, we are still adjusting, and as we reflect on our 18 months in Rwanda, in spite of my present health issues, we have absolutely no regrets.

For our Rwandan adventure to be deemed successful for our family, it had to be successful for our children. They would agree that it was. It was essential that their school experience was positive. Their time at Kigali International Community School will give them lifelong memories. They were fortunate

to be in the presence of passionate teachers who brought with them a global perspective to much of what they taught. The kids were equally privileged to make friends from all over the world. In one of our son's classes, there were 15 nationalities represented by the 18 students in the class.

Our children were also able to see and experience a world that few of their Canadian peers will ever get to experience. Every day, they saw those so much less fortunate than themselves who were happy, hopeful and generous in spite of their life circumstances.

Another important part of family life in Rwanda was just that – family life. Life in a developing country meant fewer activities for the children at school and outside of school. It was a

refreshing break to have no hockey, no soccer, and no music lessons. Instead, we could be more purposeful in planning activities within our family and with other families. We actually had time in our daily calendar. It was good to have time to take a weekend drive through some of the rural villages or play a game of Frisbee golf on the compound where we lived.

Africa has come by its reputation of a much slower pace of life quite honestly. In my work life, the slower tempo often drove me to insanity. When meeting with Ministry of Education officials, it was not unusual to wait two to three hours after an agreed upon appointment for someone to be available. I soon came to learn that schedules meant little to my African counterparts. If I had booked an appointment a week before, I would call the day before to remind the person that we had scheduled an appointment and then I would call the morning of the meeting to again make sure something else had not taken priority over our meeting. Even with all of the precautions taken, I sometimes arrived at the meeting to find out that the Minister of Education had summoned all of the managers to an emergency meeting. If that was the case, the entire process would start all over again the next week.

Spending a year-and-a-half

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in Rwanda also reminded me how much we have to be thankful for in our education system. I have written in previous articles about class sizes and low wages in African schools, but the general disrespect given to educators by parents and community members is something that will stick in my memory. While we sometimes feel undervalued by our students' parents, comparatively speaking we are held in high esteem in Canadian schools.

Each and every day in the beginning of our time in Rwanda, I fought off my natural instinct that had me believing that I was the expert and the people with whom I worked were the empty vessels. Of course, in most ways, it was certainly the reverse. I learned much more from both my Rwandan and international colleagues than I was able to offer them in return.

On top of our experiences in Rwanda, we were also fortunate to safari in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth Park and relax on the shores of the Indian Ocean in Mombasa, Kenya. On top of that, I checked one off my personal bucket list when I visited Cape Town, South Africa to attend a World Cup match in June 2010.


My wife and I would highly recommend an international experience as a part of your career. I was fortunate to have a spouse who shared my dream and to be able to volunteer for a fantastic organization that supported



Eli Thiessen (in the red Canada shirt), 5, poses with students from all over the world in his Kindergarten class at Kigali International Community School.

our family during our stay and long before we left Canada in the summer of 2009. If you're thinking about the possibilities, please do not allow your children to be an excuse to delay your adventure until they have left home. In fact, including them will only enrich the jour-

ney tenfold.

They say that once you have lived in Africa, the continent will remain in your blood. I'm not sure Africa is now in my blood, but our time in Rwanda will be a rich part of our family story forever! 

Mark Thiessen was on leave from the Cariboo-Chilcotin School District when he worked in Rwanda. This is his fourth article about his experiences. Mark has returned to Canada and can be reached at mark.thiessen@sd27.bc.ca

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