

Hi All,

I just received this from Mardge Cohen, director of the WE-ACT AIDS program in Kigali (and the INEZA sewing cooperative). She updates the state of the programs in Kigali and I thought you'd be interested. Cathi, if you think it's appropriate, please pass on to Susan.

All the best,
Holly

PS - one of the young women who visited here from Akilah in the fall of 2015 is getting married in February - it was interesting to read about the wedding!

Begin forwarded message:

From: Mardge Cohen <mardge.cohen@gmail.com>

Subject: Letter from Kigali

Date: January 16, 2018 at 4:06:35 PM EST

To: Mardge Cohen <mardgecohen@gmail.com>

Letter home January 15, 2018

Dear Friends:

It is wonderful to be back in Kigali. The disbelief and outrage about Trump's racist comments on Haiti and Africa are palpable. No one can believe he is the President; but some worry that he is giving a license to others in the U.S. who might share these prejudicial views about Africa and its people.

Our conversations mainly turn to discussions about how much there is to do to make things better here in Rwanda and in the U.S. I assure my friends and colleagues that a strong and committed group of people continue to join together to support them. I especially thank all of you whose donations allowed us to meet the \$40,000 year-end matching fund challenge from our friends at the Robert F. Meagher Charitable Foundation and members of the WE-ACTx Board. Your generous and sustained donations will help support our special Sunday children's support programs.

I joined both support groups yesterday. At St. Famille, music peers led the older youth group (16-18 year olds), in drumming, singing and moving with amazing energy and glee. More than 100 youth come twice monthly to enjoy the music, traditional dance, yoga and structured play, as well as participate in small group discussions about HIV, families and school. A new group of 19-22 year olds have been professionally trained as peer educators to lead these activities and groups.



The afternoon Sunday support group at Qadaffi Mosque now includes children up to 14 years of age. As there have been no new HIV-infected children born to women in the clinic for the last decade, there are now only 52 children ages 12 and under followed in the clinic (some have transferred in from other sites) with another 40 children under 14. This group enjoys a hip hop dance class, traditional dance, soccer, yoga and running games. Both groups conclude with a nutritious snack/meal. This week we also distributed school supplies for the new school year that begins January 22.

WE-ACTx for Hope (WFH), our official sister Rwandan organization has been awarded a new grant from the Rwanda CDC. It will support some clinical positions as well as 2 new programs: 1) over 40 peers identified by nursing staff will each help monitor and provide support for 45 patients quarterly under the supervision of the psychosocial team; 2) contact tracing of recent partners (over last year) of WFH patients. These initiatives will increase the work of all staff, but are welcome additions to assure retention in care and reduction of new infections. Pictured here is the first meeting of the peer patients.



We were privileged to be invited attend the wedding of one of the KIP (youth adherence study) youth leaders Saturday morning. Rwandan weddings are big affairs. There are 3 parts, often held on different days. We attended the first part, called the “introduction.” The bride’s family (and friends) welcomes the groom’s family (and friends). Elder male members of the families represent the two sides. They banter with each other, to the amusement of the crowd, trying to get the upper hand on whether the groom meets the bride’s family’s standards to see if the family should agree to the

marriage. They drink together several times and keep the crowd entertained. This is when the dowry is presented (previously the cow, now a check). Finally, the groom is introduced to the elders of the bride's family and the bride appears and they sit together. Then the couple presents gifts to their family and special mentors. A Rwandan traditional buffet was served. The couple then left to prepare for the church wedding that afternoon and the reception that evening. Here are Nadine and Eric leaving the introduction ceremony.



A recent NPR story

(<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/01/10/577018509/rwanda-ranks-in-the-top-5-for-gender-equity-do-its-teen-girls-agree>) described the growth of a women's debating team at Akilah Institute, which has a two-year accredited diploma program. Two youth leaders from WE-ACTx attend the school supported by scholarships and funding from our donors. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report now ranks Rwanda highly (4th in the world) because of government policies (women make up 60% of Parliament). Nonetheless, the story shares the voices of young women from the school discussing how gender roles are not equitable in daily life and how they are preparing to change this. It is always inspiring to hear how young people are engaged to keep moving things forward.

I guess we have finally "arrived" in Rwanda, as some of you may have noticed. The New York Times lists Kigali, Rwanda as one of the top 52 places to visit in 2018, and they just published 36 hours in Kigali ("a proud and progressive city that pulses with African charm" even as it tries to "reclaim its narrative 23 years after the horrific genocide") (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/12/travel/what-to-do-36-hours-in-kigali-rwanda.html>).

While they do mention as high points to visit in Kigali the Nyamirabo Women's Center, an NGO sewing project combatting gender based violence, they should have also

mentioned the WE-ACTx Clinic and Ineza, our amazing women's income generation sewing cooperative.

It makes me feel good to know that your itinerary would include seeing first-hand the strong women who make the beautiful bags, place mats, and aprons that many of you have in your homes from your generous donations over the years.

Thanks so much for your support,

Mardge

www.we-actx.org

--

Mardge Cohen MD PI, Women Interagency HIV Study (WIHS)
Medical Director, Women's Equity in Access to Care and Treatment (WE-ACTx)
Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program