

UMOJA TEMPLATE APPLIED TO RWANDA PROJECT

WRITTEN BY LEE HART



**PROVIDING PEOPLE WITH CONFIDENCE, A
SENSE OF SELF WORTH AND A FEELING OF
COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP**

A native son of Kabura, Rwanda, who has made Canada his home for more than 25 years is hoping a version of a community development program he launched in Calgary nearly 15 years ago, will help bring hope, happiness and a new sense of purpose to his home village that's still feeling the effects of a horrific civil war.

On the 30th anniversary of the Rwanda Civil War and genocide against the Tutsi people, Jean-Claude Munyezamu — who grew up in Kabura and lost most of his family during that war — has returned to his home village to launch the Ejo Youth Project.

Rather than being overwhelmed by decades of grief and bitterness, Jean-Claude says his intent is “to turn the horror into healing. I’m hoping the Ejo Youth Project is a catalyst for bringing the community together, building hope, unity and peace for children who have grown up in the shadow of killing.”

Many of Jean-Claude’s immediate and extended family members were among an estimated one million people killed in 1994 by armed Hutu militias. As a teenager he escaped to Uganda and after working in refugee camps eventually made his way to Canada in 1998.

The Ejo Youth Project is modelled after a program Jean-Claude developed in Calgary, AB about 15 years ago - Umoja Community Mosaic. Umoja has become a program that helps immigrants and newcomers to Canada to feel they are part of their new communities. His vision started with organizing soccer teams and games to involve the youth and help them develop friendships, but from there that vision has expanded to a much wider community outreach program.

Key elements of the Ejo Youth Project, as it unfolds over the next few years is to acquire land and build a community centre near the EP Umurava School in Kabura which will serve as the hub of programming. The project will also see development of three sporting fields and tennis courts, as well as a computer lab.

As it is built, the program will recruit volunteers, coaches and youth leaders, coordinate sporting activities such as soccer, basketball and volleyball, and also facilitate after- school enrichment programs such as computer classes and music lessons.

Down the road, the objective is to offer skills development programs helping local residents learn business management and marketing skills for their locally-owned business enterprises.

The Ejo Youth Project has somewhat of a lofty goal, but it got off to a important start this summer, as community members brought their labour to dig a 700 metre long trench which will hold a water line that will carry water from the Kabura community to Umurava school that has never had basic services such as running potable water.



CHILDREN FROM UMURAVA SCHOOL AND THE CANADIAN VOLUNTEERS



VILLAGERS GATHERED TO HELP DIG THE DITCH FOR THE WATER PIPELINE

The waterline trench being dug with shovels and pick axes through some fairly difficult stretches of compact clay, is 700 metres long, 60 cm deep and 40 cm wide. To be completed in July 2024, the water line will also serve the planned Ejo community centre which will be built near the school.

“People are already getting behind the project. Dozens of villagers showed up to help dig the ditch for the water line. They provided their labour but you could see a new spirit in their actions and in their eyes. They were proud of helping out and being involved. It is an important start to building a sense of community.” Kabura is a rural village in the Kayonza District in the eastern province of Rwanda. It is home to some 20,000 people, most of whom lack access to running water and electricity and are engaged in subsistence agriculture.

There are two schools, with about 3,000 combined spaces. But recent government statistics show that fewer than 40 per cent of high-school aged youth attend school, and just 15 per cent graduate. There are few employment opportunities. “In Canada, kids have so many choices,” says Jean Claude. “In Rwandan rural villages like this, they have nothing,”

Getting water to the school is a start in changing those statistics. As part of his recent trip to Rwanda to launch the Ejo Youth Project, Jean Claude brought two young Calgary-based Umoja volunteers with him. Maia Lachance of Calgary and Tristan Dermody from Montreal, both university students, who have been volunteering their time with the Umoja project. During their month-long stay in Kabura, Rwanda they worked with students there as well — Maia provided classes teaching French and English languages, while Tristan, provided classes in computer science. He was even able to remove viruses which had infected computers at the local school, so students had a functioning computer lab again.

“A big part of this effort is to provide hope and demonstrate there is opportunity for young people,” says Jean Claude. “We want to provide a message that it is worth staying in school. Ejo Youth Project is designed around the foundational principle of community ownership. It will bring music, sports, education, tutoring, vocational and entrepreneurship training, and food security to youth and their families in Kabura.”

The waterline is a good start, but Jean Claude says a fund raising project is needed to raise about \$270,000 to complete the first phase of the Ejo Youth Project. The community has committed to contribute labour to the construction effort. The Kayonza mayor, provincial governor, and Rwanda minister of local government have visited the potential site and given commitments to bring water and electricity to the village in support of community development.

“We have the support of the community, now we just need the funds to make it happen,” he says.



A CHILD FROM KABURA VILLAGE, RWANDA



THE STUDENTS FROM THE UMURAVA SCHOOL