

THE POWER UNLEASHED BY A SOCCER BALL

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FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS IN CALGARY, A COMMUNITY PROJECT IS BROUGHT TO RWANDA

A 700 metre long pipeline being hand built by residents of a small village in eastern Rwanda, will not only carry much-needed water to one of the local schools when completed this summer, but it is also a very symbolic project carrying a message of forgiveness, hope for peace, and opportunities ahead for villagers of this once war torn, impoverished community.

The waterline is the first element of an ambitious community development project, called Ejo Youth Project, launched by a former Rwandan resident whose roots run deep in the reddish clay soils of the village of Kabura, in the eastern district of Kayzona.

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CANADIAN VOLUNTEER SPENDING TIME WITH THE KIDS OF THE VILLAGE

Although Rwanda-born Jean-Claude Munyezamu, has lived in Canada for the past 26 years, he has never forgotten his home of Kabura. His success over the past 15 years in helping newcomers and immigrants to Canada build their lives in the western Canadian city of Calgary through a project called Umoja Community Mosaic, formerly Soccer Without Boundaries, led him to travel some 13,500 km to introduce a similar program which will hopefully inspire hope, respect and a sense of community in his home village.

"The people of my village have survived unimaginable brutality, which devastated their lives and shattered their sense of community," says Jean-Claude. "They live in extreme poverty without many of the basics of life that so much of the world takes for granted. But they don't need a hand out, they need a hand up.

"Through the EJO project — EJO stands for “tomorrow” in Kinyarwanda, the official language of Rwanda —we want people to discover their sense of community and their personal value. Much can be accomplished if we work together, learn together and play together," says Jean-Claude. "It is about being honest, compassionate, loving toward others and respecting ourselves. It takes a bit of money to create an infrastructure, but it is more about bringing people together in a sense of community.

"And we are seeing the start of that already this summer. Villagers have been coming here in recent weeks, picking up shovels and pick axes to help dig this trench that will eventually carry a waterline from the village to the school. And that is only a beginning. It is through their own hard work they are bringing about improvements to their community. They can take pride in that."

Jean-Claude was born and raised in Kabura, but as a teenager escaped to Uganda just ahead of the 1994 Rwandan Civil War. The war was genocide against the Tutsi people claiming the lives of many of Jean-Claude's immediate and extended family members. They were among an estimated one million Tutsi, Hutu and Twa minorities killed by armed Hutu militias.

It was, in part, by surviving the brutality of that war, that inspired a compassion in Jean-Claude to help others. After volunteering in refugee camps in Somalia and Sudan, he eventually moved to Canada in 1998. After being in Canada a few years and observing that children in his neighbourhood were getting into trouble, Jean-Claude took some soccer balls to a nearby green space on a Saturday morning resulting in the children starting to play together and build friendships. He continues to nurture community relationships with each participating kid and parent, while directing the growing Umoja organization.



LOCAL VOLUNTEER DIGGING A PATH FOR THE WATER PIPELINE

What started as a sports program known as Soccer Without Boundaries, has evolved into Umoja Community Mosaic. Sporting activities are still an important part of the program, but Umoja now involves broader outreach to the community helping to provide supplemental food and culturally appropriate foods to newcomers to Canada. As well Umoja provides education and learning opportunities, women's programming, leadership training, recreation, arts, anti-racism and mental health counselling and wellness programs.

"Our focus is to help newcomers to feel they are part of the community," says Jean-Claude. "It is more than just living somewhere, we want people to feel a real sense of belonging. Sporting activities, for example, are an excellent way to bring people of all cultures together in fun and fellowship. But beyond that we want to create a welcoming environment in every neighbourhood we serve ensuring everyone feels included regardless of age, language, gender, religion, ethnicity, or culture — this is their community, they belong."



JEAN-CLAUDE ADDRESSING THE VILLAGERS (LEFT), LOCAL VOLUNTEERS AND A CANADIAN INTERN WORKING THE GROUND FOR THE PIPELINE, (CENTER), LOCAL VOLUNTEERS COMMUNING (RIGHT)