

PARSONS PROFILE Spring, 2018:

Two sides of a great experience “Martha’s & Emily’s” “Mother & Daughter”

Martha’s Story:

It almost seems like a dream that I actually was in Africa last fall. It is not a place I had ever thought I would visit, but when your daughter is there for 27 months, you do things you didn’t expect to do. I am so glad Emily is in Rwanda, I loved my trip there to see her, and I loved the people and the beautiful country. I feel very lucky to have had the experience of going there.

The first thing most people think of when they hear about Rwanda is the awful, government-sponsored genocide that took place in 1994...and that is if they have even heard of Rwanda. It was kept pretty much out of the news as neighbors killed neighbors and an estimated 1,000,000 people were killed in 100 days and 2 million left the country as refugees. If most people have heard anything about Rwanda it is because they watched the movie, “Hotel Rwanda”. Before I left on my trip I read several books about Rwanda and the genocide, but the movie does not accurately depict what happened. The genocide was an awful thing that these people went through and those who survived and have continued to survive are working very hard at putting the genocide behind them and helping their country unify, progress, and prosper.

I don’t think there is a flat piece of land in Rwanda. It is called the land of 1000 Hills. Everywhere you look there is another hill off in the distance. Ninety percent of the people are farmers and they terrace and till these hills, growing food to exist on and maybe extra to sell at the market. I couldn’t help but think how much my father, Earle Parsons, would have loved to see the agriculture there. They grow bananas, plantains, potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, and rice. They raise sheep, goats, chickens, and pigs. However, eating meat is rare. They do not have refrigeration, so maybe have meat 1-2 times a month.

Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Africa. It is also one of the most densely populated, having about 7 million people in an area about the size of Massachusetts. It has a mostly rural population and is located just south of the equator. It has a temperate climate because the elevation is 3000-5000 feet above sea level.

Emily lives on the top of one of those many hills. To get to her home, we had to take a two-hour bus ride from the capital, Kigali, to one of the other larger cities in southern Rwanda called Butare. From there it was a 45-minute trip to the top of the mountain. Usually one would take a moto, a small motor bike from Butare to Gikonko. My first trip up was at night in a taxi because I had a few bags and it was raining. The road to Gikonko Health Center is not paved. It’s full of pot holes and ruts that make our New England roads in the spring seem smooth in comparison. As we were driving along, suddenly there was a big clunk and the car stopped. I looked out the window and we were on the edge of a drop off. I could see ground, but it was way below us. The driver asked us to get out of the car. By then we had attracted about 10 men from the nearby village. The whole front left tire was in a huge hole. Before I could think about what we could do to get out of this mess, the men from the village surrounded the car and just lifted it out of the hole and set it down on the road. My introduction to Rwandan hospitality!!

My other trips up and down the mountain were on a moto. It was a little scary the first time, but by the time I left I was taking pictures of the beautiful hillside on my way down the mountain. I must say, as beautiful as the pictures are, they do not capture the true beauty of the country side.

Gikonko Health Center is run by the Catholic Church - a church, schools, nursery age through grade 12, surrounds it. Just down the hill a bit, there is a small village. In Rwanda, you have a village that is part of a sector which in turn is part of a district, which is part of a Province. Gikonko Health Center is in one of the four sectors and 30 villages that compose the Gisagara District. Gisagara District is in the Southern Province of Rwanda. Gikonko health Center is run by Dr. Uta, a German surgeon who is also a nun. She is renowned for doing life changing surgeries on kids with Hydrocephalus and Spinal Bifida. These are two conditions that can occur with poor pre-natal health and nutrition. Both conditions can severely limit a child that is born with them. If Hydrocephalus is corrected early, the child can live a normal life. Spinal Bifida is harder to correct but can be improved with proper intervention. Google Gikonko Health Center and read about the work Dr. Uta has done. It's amazing! She has been there for 27 years and runs the very well-organized Health Center.

The Health Center provides housing for Emily. She has a cute studio apartment near some of the nurses and other Health Center employees. She has her Parsons Family Award proudly on display in her bookcase. She is a very lucky Peace Corps volunteer because she has a flush toilet and a cold shower. Dr. Uta treats her employees quite well as far as housing goes. You always must sleep under a mosquito net in Rwanda to avoid malaria. That is another area the health center focuses on, malaria prevention.

All the staff at Gikonko Health Center are amazing. They treated me like I was a celebrity. If my trip taught me anything, it made me realize that I do not have to worry about Emily. She is surrounded by wonderful people who look out for her. It is like she has 20 mothers, and some big brothers, looking after her. All were more than willing to tell me what their role at the Health Center is. I was amazed how sophisticated their record keeping is regarding the diseases that they see. They must report on how many cases of diarrhea (it can kill a child), HIV-Aids and malaria they see as well as maternal and fetal death and incidences of malnutrition. They are always trying to make these numbers go down through the educational programs they offer the people from the villages. Each village has three Community Workers. These are volunteers who help identify pregnant women, sick children, and families in trouble food wise. They try to get people to come to the Health Center for medical attention.

Gisagara District is one of three poorest districts in Rwanda. In 2005, 51% of the children were considered malnourished. Interventions have been instituted and now the incidence of malnutrition is down to 38%. This is due in part to government programs that try to educate the parents about nutrition and make them more responsible for the children's nutrition by helping them with backyard and village gardens and enrolling the children in milk programs. This milk program is one of Emily's responsibilities. They keep careful records of the baby's heights and weights, and if they are identified as malnourished, they are entered into a program that gives them education as well as milk for the baby.

Rwanda has universal health care for its people. All you must do is sign up, and you pay a nominal fee based on your income to get health care. This amazed me! And what else amazed me was that mothers in the milk program are not just given milk and sent on their way. They must participate in nutrition classes. They also must do some work at the health care center. It might be food prep, gardening or cleaning. They would sling the babies on their back and do the jobs and then head home. They participate in the milk program twice a week. It isn't a total freebie for them. The United States might take a lesson!

I have never seen such cute babies as I did when I was helping Emily and Donata, the dietician, do heights and weights. They have huge brown eyes and look at you with such cute expressions! Mamas carry the babies on their backs from the minute they are born until they can walk a good distance on their own. The kids never fuss and never try to get down. The Mamas work in the fields, go to market, clean, garden, and walk everywhere with the babies on their backs. You often see young girls and boys carrying water bottles or a younger sibling on their backs, practicing this skill.

The older children, and even some adults, are fascinated by people with white skin. Emily and I were walking up from the village one day and I felt little fingers on my arm. When I turned around there were six or seven kids following us, and one was petting me. They think white skin might feel different. It happened several times. The kids also like to practice their English. The language of Rwanda is Kinyarwanda. The second language was once French, but the children are now learning English. Every morning when Emily and I would walk from her house uphill to the Center, and the kids would be in the school yard. They always said "hello" and we would answer "hello," and then they would ask, "How are you?" We would say fine and ask how they were. No answer, just giggles. They hadn't learned any more English. The older teens and 20-year-olds were very proud of their English skills and often would ask to try to communicate in English and say they wanted to get better at it. Some of them were very good.

As much as I loved helping at the Health Center, Emily wanted me to see other parts of Rwanda. So, we traveled around. We went to the city she initially was housed in, located in Eastern Province and called Rwamagana. There I got to meet her host family and see where she lived for the first nine weeks she was there. The family was lovely, and again you would think I was some kind of a celebrity. We had tea with the family. Their living room could have been a living room in America, but the house did not have running water and you had to use a latrine and take bucket baths! I also got to meet some of Emily's Peace Corp friends and some friends she had made while living in that city. It was wonderful to be able to put actual faces to the people she talked about all the time.

One of the highlights of my visit, and a highlight for Emily, was that we took a safari to Akagera National Park. It is not a huge park because after the genocide people lived on the land and hunted the animals. Eventually the land was divided, some for the people and some for the animals and preservation of the park. Akagera has been slowly reintroducing some of the animals that had been wiped out. We had a wonderful time.

We hired a driver with a pop-top safari truck and we had a great guide. We were one of the first trucks out and saw so many animals. We rounded a corner and a whole herd of elephants with a

baby were right there in front of us. We saw zebras, many kinds of deer, water buffalo, and hippos. I want you to know that baby wart hogs are the cutest little things. It's hard to believe they grow up into big wart hogs! The best part for Emily was when we found the giraffes. They were just grazing and majestically meandering along. They are just beautiful creatures.

We decided to stay in the tents at Akagera. It ended up being the fanciest place we stayed, totally green - solar power, no plastics of any kind. It is located on a river and we were in tents along an elevated walkway. There were only nine tents, so it was a small place. They fed us a traditional Rwandan meal on a deck by candlelight. We had veggies, bread, and dish that reminded me of chili, all cooked on an open fire pit. As we were eating, two hippos came out of the river and we were able to watch them rooting along the ground looking for food. All the tents had a little patio. Before my trip, I had never sat out and read a book with a baboon playing nearby! The whole experience is one we both will never forget.

The other spot Emily wanted me to see was located in Northern Rwanda. We went to Gisenyi. It took pretty much all day to get there on the buses, and the countryside was breathtaking. It was greener than both Southern and Eastern Rwanda. The road was narrow with many hair-pin turns. It is the area where the mountain gorillas were, and we would have loved to see them, but a Gorilla Trek is very, very expensive. So, we chose to stay in the Diane Fossey Hotel, and that was as close as we came to gorillas. Gisenyi is a fairly touristy city. It had a different feel to it than the other big cities. Lots of recreational activities take place on the lake. They have a mix of American/European type food and Rwandan food. We spent a very relaxing day sitting by the lake, taking in the activities, and enjoying the food.

Then we headed back to Kigali, the capital, and spent our last day together relaxing by the pool at Mille d' Collines, or as it is more commonly known, Hotel Rwanda. It's a beautiful hotel and so hard to believe all that happened there during the genocide. In Kigali, there is a beautiful memorial to the genocide. It's very moving exhibit, and many victims are buried there. They still find bodies that are added to the massive graves that are surrounded by beautiful gardens. If you have ever seen the Viet Nam Memorial and experienced how it feels to view that, this memorial gives you the same overwhelming feelings.

It was a wonderful trip. Getting to see and do things with Emily, and meet her friends and co-workers, was my favorite part. The Rwandan people are fun, hardworking proud people who make do with so little. Rwanda is a very clean country, and the scenery is breathtaking. Fun fact: They are one of the cleanest sub-Saharan cities in Africa. I felt very safe there. If it wasn't over 24 hours of travel to get there, and a bit expensive, I would love to go back. Emily will be home this summer. Jerry and I could not be prouder of her!

Emily's Story:

Muraho!

Greetings from Rwanda to the Parsons Family Association! For those of you who I have not met over the years, my name is Emily, and I am an honorary Parsons through my mother, Martha Parsons Ethier. I am currently living and working in rural Rwanda as a Maternal and Child Health volunteer as part of my 27-month Peace Corps service. Rwanda is a small rural country

in East Africa known by most of the world as the site of large scale ethnically-based Genocide that occurred in 1994. Now, however, Rwanda is a beautiful, peaceful and stable country that is held up by the Western world as being an example of successful democracy and upper economic mobility in the developing world. Rwanda is now known as the Land of 1,000 Hills, and I am proud to call it my home.

As stated above, I became involved in the Parsons Family Association through my mother whose maiden name is Parsons and my father, Jerry, who has always supported the organization. I grew up attending reunions all over the New England as well as planning meetings and other special events. My time spent around the PFA and its members has fostered an appreciation for history and its preservation and consideration in the modern world, as well as a sense of civic duty and the importance of community outreach and hard work. I can honestly say that these lessons and values learned have largely contributed to the decisions that have led me here to Rwanda and the Peace Corps.

I recently had the chance to reflect even further on the influence these experiences and values have had on my life and work when my mom came to visit me in Rwanda. At the end of October 2017, my mom took three planes and traveled for over 30 hours to meet me in the capitol called Kigali. Over the next two weeks we spent our time traveling around the country visiting a mixture of tourist areas, historical sites, educational institutions, and we spent a week in my village.

We went on a safari at Akagera National Park and saw hippos, giraffes, and elephants, and we spent the night in a tent lodge looking out over the park and surrounded by animals and the stars. We spent time on the water near Lake Kivu and travelled to visit the host family I lived with when I first came to Rwanda. We visited the Genocide Memorial in the city and took a picture outside of Peace Corps Headquarters.

However, my favorite time during her visit was the time we spent in my village. While in my village, my mom was able to stay in my small house and experience the daily struggles and joys of living and working in a rural village health center in the hills of Rwanda, including periodically having no running water or electricity. She met my friends, neighbors, and staff and was able to see for herself how safe and supported I am by my community. We assisted around the Health Center as needed, such as helping to weigh and measure babies before they received vaccinations, all of which are done to fight the physical and developmental effects of childhood stunting which is common in Rwanda.

One of my favorite pictures taken during her time here was taken during a “quiet” moment on vaccination day when Mom was able to sit and hold one of the tiniest babies that had come in with its mama. One thing (of many) that my mom and I have in common is our love of babies and little kids, so I knew that she would love working at vaccination days when we are surrounded by adorable babies and their proud mamas. My health center serves a catchment area of only a few square miles, but that area is home to over 26,000 people. This means that any community event, such as vaccination days, can become chaotic and overwhelming, especially if you don’t speak the language or understand the culture. But, Mom jumped in like a champ and my staff LOVED having her here. One favorite observations she made while traveling around

my new home was how much my Grandpa Earl Parsons, who lived on, worked, and ran his family farm where my mom grew up in a small close-knit community, would have loved this country, the landscape and the people.

I am incredibly thankful and proud to have been able to share this experience with my mom and by extension with my friends and family at home. With just over six months left in my service and living in Rwanda, I have not only begun planning for my re-entry into the US and for getting back into being an active member in PFA and my other community and service activities, but I have had a chance to reflect on the people and events that brought me here. After spending over a year away, and then being able to share this experience here with my mom, I am reminded how important family truly is and how lucky I am to be a part of ours. Now, just as 24 years ago my parents brought me into their family, and by extension the PFA, I am lucky enough to have brought my mom into my second family here in Rwanda.

As I say to all my friends and family since I began my service here when signing off.
Love you to Rwanda and back!

Emily