



## Umva! Listen, and let me tell you our story

"If I had a sense of foreboding about this trip, it is because traveling into the unknown can also be like dying. After the anguish of the goodbyes and the departure itself, you seem to diminish, growing smaller and smaller, vanishing into the distance ... You're gone, no one can depend on you, you are only a dim memory ... What good are you, unobtainable and so far away?"

The Last Train to Zona Verde, Paul Theroux



A mother and her two daughters.

n 2013, I did the unimaginable. I vanished into the distance and traveled to Rwanda — the land of a thousand hills. Three years and four journeys later, my sense of foreboding has diminished, however the anguish of goodbyes has not. As Theroux predicted, my travels to Africa have made me unobtainable. I do believe, however, I have found the good in being so far away.

Before the plane touched down amidst Rwanda's spiraling mountains, my knowledge of Africa's natural dye industry was limited to a handful of regional cultures and dye sources. Yet, despite my fascination by the complexity of this vast continent, my sights had never been set on going there. And then, quite unexpectedly, I was invited in 2013 to work with widows in Rwanda's Northern Province as part of a program, sponsored by True Vineyard Ministries (TVM), to help women improve their natural dye techniques and color palette. The widows earn modest wages washing, carding, spinning and naturally dyeing yarns produced from their small flock of Merino sheep, which were originally imported from Kenya and provide greater value producing wool than meat.

With little hesitation, likely propelled more by enchantment than words of caution, I beetled off to Africa, hoping my efforts would help the women and TVM's mission prosper. I tucked extracts of madder, indigo, cochineal, and weld in my suitcase, eventually completing the dyepot with onion skins I obtained from the local markets. My time in Rwanda ultimately felt all too brief, but the project was

a success. The widows were delighted. And I returned home, fully captivated by this land in the heart of Africa.

The genocide that consumed Rwanda in 1994 is hall-marked by such untenable abuse, it often overshadows the details that precipitated the initial turmoil, leaving few outside of its borders with little more than a fading memory. In the wake of my visit, I realized I needed to understand more about these people who had slipped seamlessly into my heart.

The facts are staggering. Between April and July 1994, upwards of 800,000 Rwandans were killed. Most of the dead were Tutsis, the longstanding "favored" ethnic group, although outnumbered by the Hutus six to one.

Those who did the killing were Hutus, who are traditionally soil-tilling people as opposed to the Tutsis, who are cattle herders. For many reasons, many of which originated when Rwanda was under Belgian control, Hutus were deemed an "inferior" class. Therein lie the roots of simmering discontent, which eventually boiled over in 1959 when the Hutus killed 20,000 Tutsis.

In 1962, Belgium relinquished control and thereby granted Rwanda its independence. The Hutus reclaimed their rung on the ladder and the balance of power shifted.

dent Paul Kagame said, "If you properly use the knowledge and strength you are acquiring, you will take this country to another level. If you do it the wrong way, you will destroy it."

Seventy percent of Rwanda's population is under the age of 30. The future of Rwanda is in their hands.

Prior to my visit, the magnitude of Rwanda's suffering was distant — faceless words on a page. Scenes on the televi-



Rwanda's one4one logo.

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Decades of discrimination are slow to disappear and though the Tutsis are in the minority, they were feared, resented, and often blamed for the country's social and economic woes. On April 6, 1994, a plane carrying President Habyarimana, a Hutu, was shot down. Genocide erupted overnight. Hutu extremists began executing their master plan: to destroy the entire Tutsi civilian population. Political leaders who might have quelled or temporarily stymied the movement were among the first to be killed. Tutsis and people suspected of being Tutsi, were killed in their homes. They were killed at roadblocks. Often entire families were assassinated and 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped, many by HIV-positive men.

Planned use of rape by HIV-infected men was used as a weapon of mass extermination.

Nearly 22 years have passed since the 1994 killings. The hope for lasting peace is still uncertain, but there is reason for optimism. In a speech to Rwandan youth, Rwanda's Presi-

template. Rather than getting bogged down in the inevitable administrative costs of running a nonprofit, I saw how donations could be directly used to provide assistance. And so began my next journey, not at all as the one Theroux described.

## Meeting Mariya

Through a mutual friend in Rwanda, I met a young man who shared about his family and the hard times they were having. We began corresponding via email during the winter months following my first visit and in March 2014, he told me that their family cow had died. His grandmother, Mariya, had become the head of household owing to losses from the genocide and other tragedies. The responsibility of raising many of her grandchildren was all consuming and further compounded when one of Mariya's daughters died in childbirth, leaving her to raise a newborn.

After the death of the newborn's mother, there was no ready access to milk and now, the cow was dead too. The baby needed milk and I reached out to as many as possible as fast as I could. I wrote a post on Facebook asking for financial help to buy a new cow.

The response was overwhelming.

I returned to Rwanda in May 2014 with money in my pocket and Mariya negotiated for a new cow. This one act became the foundation for our mutual trust and respect. We named the cow Inshuti, which means friends in Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda. A seed was sown and an idea began to take root.

It was during this visit that I was able to spend time with Mariya and her family. We communicated through her grandson who was able to translate, and often times we communicated without words at all. I was not yet clear about our future but I felt something unique unfolding, so I just let the days take me along.

When a guest comes to visit, Rwandan tradition is most welcoming. When I would visit Mariya, a few family members would first meet me at a designated place. Then we would all walk together to Mariya's home. The walk along the footpaths is slow and peaceful going up and down the hillside, greeting neighbors along the way. I am called a muzungu, meaning a white person/Westerner. A muzungu sighting brings many stares from the villagers, sometimes begging, and sometimes laughter. Often, I would hear women and little kids call out "Muzungu! Muzungu!" I would turn to them, smile, and say "mwiriwe" meaning good afternoon and they would reply "yego" for yes.

The staring and laughing takes some adjusting to, but I understand their reaction comes from a place of curiosity, not disdain for my presence. I remember seeing a T-shirt one day in the city market that read, 'My name is not Muzungu' boldly printed on the front.

I never saw anyone wearing one.

hough natural dyer Nancy Zeller has studied with the who's who of natural dyers over the years and built her own reputation dyeing her own line of Long Ridge Farm fibers and textiles, she knew virtually nothing about the natural dyestuffs she would find in Rwanda when she visited to study the native plants at INES (Institut D'Enseignement Supérieur) University, Musanze.

Through studies with Nigerian indigo and adire master Gasali Adeyemo, Nancy knew about the gorgeous tradition of Yoruba indigo dyeing and through her mentor, Michele Wipplinger, founder of Earthues, Nancy was familiar with Malian mud cloth—an almost 1,000 year old technique for dyeing cloth using fermented mud. Beyond that, Nancy had no idea what she would find in the university's libraries and growing in the institution's botanical gardens.

What she discovered was more than encouraging. Poring over reference documents that listed local plant names in Kinyarwanda with their Latin family names, Nancy was able to identify plants that might make good dyes by their scientific names. For example, following the trail of the name *Asteraceae*, what is commonly known as the daisy family, of which goldenrod is a member, Nancy discovered goldenrod relatives with the potential to create yellow.

"If you know your Latin," she says, "you can go anywhere."

Having identified 3 dozen plants with viable dye properties, Nancy started dyeing—proving that Rwanda has the right stuff.



Natural dye samples for the university.

"There were some lovely colors," she says. "Reds, greens, and some surprises from plants I thought might not yield."

Given that she has yet to publish her results, Nancy is reluctant to divulge specifics about her findings. When she does, she believes the work will bring credence to the value of the INES botanical gardens and help create sustainable sources of income for Rwandan artists and entrepreneurs. Her research will continue in Rwanda in collaboration with INES.





Top: Grandmother carrying Akim. Bottom: Transportation in Musanze takes different forms.

On that first visit to Mariya's home, I was welcomed into the lounge room, or living room as we know it. There was a dirt floor made from the local red clay, the walls were made

of mud block with an exposed ceiling to the metal roof, and a few pieces of simple wood furniture.

I remember being struck by its utter simplicity and soon I settled in. One of the senior women in the family brought me some fresh passion fruit juice and imineke (the very best small, sweet bananas), and a plate of fresh doughnuts.

The other adults came to greet me and we proceeded to share the food together. Then the children came into the lounge, the boys in long pants and T-shirts, the girls in crisp, clean skirts that came below the knee. Each one personally welcomed me and then filed out to the back of the home to play. Their manners were flawless and their smiles ir-

resistible. With Mariya's family, there is order and respect. Yet there is also a boundless sense of love and caring for one another from the youngest to the eldest.

## Winds of change

One afternoon during a visit to Mariya's, the great African skies exploded. Thunder grew loud and angry, the rains battered everything and everyone. The temperature dropped 15 degrees in a matter of minutes and soon, the dirt clay floor grew moist and slimy. With no ceiling for protection, only exposed beams, the room grew cold almost instantly. I was cold. We were all cold.

I went to the front door to catch a glimpse of the driving rain. My eyes searched along the hilltops engulfed in an army of storm clouds, then back inside to the lounge with its wet, slimy floor and finally, my eyes rested on Mariya. I saw endurance and kindness. But most of all I saw strength. There and then, I knew this woman needed a blessing, having lost so many children and loved ones, having survived the genocide while protecting those she could. Mariya cares for her children and her grandchildren, she tends the cow, farms her small plot of land growing food for meals and to sell at the local market. She carries the baby, Akim, on her back throughout most of the day. She is the pillar of the entire family. I made a promise to myself not to abandon this family. If there was a way to help Mariya's family out of poverty, I had to try.

Employment opportunities in Rwanda, even with an education and a skill, are difficult at best. For older women — above age 35 — it is virtually impossible. Selling wares at the market is the best and often only hope. The women



Mariva's new home!

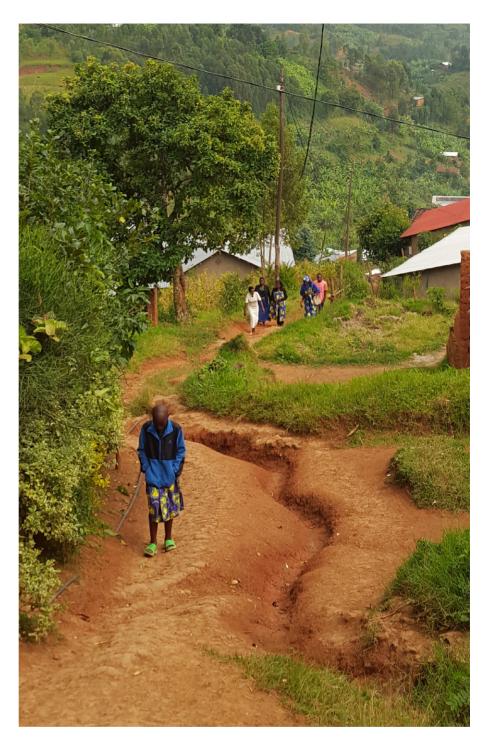
want to work but their options are limited. Mariya is over 65 and her eldest daughter is over 40. They are strong and capable, but they are trapped in a culture that defines their options based on their age. In 2014, I founded Rwanda – one4one as a way of further collecting donations and support, believing that I could one day create a sustainable solution for Mariya and her family.

Fortunately, Mariya is quite talented with some of the traditional Rwandan handcrafts of basket weaving, pottery, and sewing. When she learned I was using plants to create color, she wanted to learn more and, of course, I was thrilled to show her. We agreed that I would come to her house one afternoon to teach her how to create color using leaves, stems, berries and other natural dyestuffs. And so, in the cool of the lounge, with her grandson translating, Mariya and I made art together. It was at that moment that I saw a purpose to my natural dye knowledge. If I could teach Mariya and her daughter to naturally dye textiles, I could find a way to market them, ultimately providing them with a new source of much needed income.

The bulk of the burden for them to succeed would unquestionably be on me, but for them to have work, a chance to earn money, and to have a vested interest in a small cause was a once in a lifetime opportunity for both of us.

In addition to my growing relationship with Mariya during my 2014 visit, I also met a prominent Rwandan who arranged a meeting with the rector of INES (Institue D'Enséignment Supérieur) University, Musanze. He understood my interest in researching Rwanda's indigenous plants for their natural dye properties, knowing the work would benefit both the university and the artisans. As a result, I was offered a research residency beginning in 2015.

There are more than 300 native species of medicinal plants, shrubs and trees at the university's botanical gardens, which are predominantly used for research, provid-



Footpath leading to Mariya's home.

ing usage and dosage information to traditional Rwandan healers. Medicinal plants have been the standard in treatment for seemingly forever, although the increased availability of Western medicine has gained acceptance. A week on antibiotics can feel like a miracle cure!

With most plant species at my fingertips and a lab to do the research, my dream to document Rwandan plant species for natural color would take a giant leap forward. I returned home to the US with a head full of ideas and work to do to prepare for my 2015 adventure.

My first order of business was to set a new fundraising goal. My intention

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was to improve Mariya's home by building cement floors and hung ceilings, plus make outside improvements to prevent further erosion to the house. Not the least of these improvements was to bring water closer to her home. There is no plumbing in most homes. Typically, households fetch water every day in jerry cans. For Mariya's family this meant up to three trips daily to a well, walking 20 minutes each way. On-site water would be a true blessing.

## Learning Kinyarwanda

I also arranged for an apartment in Musanze, and made a commitment to learn Kinyarwanda, lest I be rendered mute, forcing me to communicate by waving my hands to little or no avail.

And so, my lessons in Kinyarwanda began. Every day Mariya's grandson emailed me four sentences, two in English and two in Kinyarwanda which I had to translate, return, and have corrected. Understandably, I had more than my share of confusion and frustration. However, my studies paid off and after a year of near daily assignments, I can read and write in simple Kinyarwanda, although my pronunciation is still, well ... not quite perfect.

By May 2015, I was ready to beetle off to Rwanda again. This time, I would stay for two months in order to complete the research at the university, oversee the home improvements, and begin the dye work with the ladies.

It was during this stay that my "place" in Musanze began to shift. I was able to purchase food at the market and readily engage in simple chats. I was able to negotiate moto rides, as they are my favorite mode of local transportation. Moto travel (hopping on the back of a small motorcycle) is not without its hazards but there is no substitute for its efficiency. The drivers are friendly and appreciate my efforts to speak Kinyarwanda. They smile and say "ikinyarwanda urakizi" meaning "you are knowing Kinyarwanda." I reply, "ndageregeza," meaning, "I am trying!" which always elicits more smiles. The driver provides the passenger with a helmet, which is guaranteed to be in varying states of disrepair. The shield is often so scratched, the view, especially at night, is one giant blur, and the neck strap is often loose enough to wrap around my torso.



The roadways are typically a chaotic confluence of pedestrians, cars, and trucks, with men pushing bicycles stacked with potato sacks, charcoal, bundles of sugarcane and, no doubt, the kitchen sink.

It's best not to let the mind wander to what inherent perils are in the road ahead, for then you miss the beauty of the ride.

For weeks, as I listened to everyone speaking Kinyarwanda, one word was a constant in conversation. Umva (pronounced OOM-vah) is used to catch attention in a conversation. Umva means "listen." On my last afternoon at Mariya's, listening to everyone chatting and enjoying their time together, Umva came to life. With brand new cement floors, a brand new ceiling, a water pump close to her home, Mariya and I could now share conversation while enjoying passion fruit juice and doughnuts.

Not only had the home improvements been a success, but also the ladies of Umva had dyed more than 100 textile pieces during my brief two-month stay. Without question, the future was beginning to take shape.

In the months that followed my 2015 visit, Umva has presented at trade shows, established points of sale in both Rwanda and the US, created an online retail store and, most importantly, has provided the family with income. The ladies excel at dyeing the wools and silks that are provided, and take their work seriously. They have been trained to analyze the results from each dyepot and use that knowledge to continue dyeing a consistent, high quality product. With each piece sold, they are lifted a bit further out of poverty, slowly building the steps to a secure future.

In January 2016, I returned to Rwanda, not only to continue the dyework with the ladies but also to develop ideas for the future. One vision is to have Umva dye fabrics that could be designed into fashion. The first step is being realized, as Umva will be part of the annual Rwanda Cultural Fashion Show this coming September. Umva will collaborate with a Rwandan fashion designer to create a number of designs that will be presented at the annual event in Kigali. We will be present all day for the exhibition and attend the fashion show in the evening. Bringing natural dyeing to the fashion stage in Rwanda is a wonderful beginning. It is the culmination of many stages of a developing idea. I cannot properly express my gratitude for the support of the many donors who help keep Rwanda - one4one moving forward. The whole project has unfolded in the most amazing and heartwarming way.



Nancy Zeller with an avid jump-roper! Opposite: Ladies from Umva proudly displaying their naturally dyed shawls.

Through the unyielding support of family and friends, Rwanda – one4one successfully raised \$7,200 in its first fundraising campaign and during my visit in the summer of 2015, all of the improvements were successfully completed. Since then, donors are updated regularly and continue to witness the project's success. The goal for 2016 is \$7,000 and we are optimistic about reaching it.

Most of the time when I am in Musanze, I rely on moto travel, but when it is time to return home I must go by taxi, stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey with oversized bags, now filled with Umva's hand and earth colored creations. Joseph is my taxi driver for these trips and during our time traveling through the hillsides to Kigali, enjoying the vistas from 6,200 feet and the fresh clean air, we always meet Mariya and her family by the roadside for one last goodbye.

Mariya and I hug, holding each other tightly and looking quietly into one another's eyes. When I know I have used up Joseph's kindnesses for waiting I get back in the taxi and we leave Musanze, a lump in my throat and tears falling gently as I reluctantly crawl into the back seat.

I will miss this place. This land that was once a simple name on a map. This land of a thousand hills. However, most of all, I will miss Mariya and her family, who have brought a richness to my world, coloring it in the best way possible. Naturally.  $\mathcal{W}_F$ 

For more information about Rwanda one4one, please visit: www.rwandaone4one.org