

by
hand
by
hobby

How One Woman's Trip to Rwanda Became a Personal Mission

By Caroline Tremblay

When it came to the history and current state of Rwanda, Nancy Zeller admits, "I was totally uneducated." She knew of the genocide that had taken place there, but that was about it. She also had no idea that Africa, a place she had never imagined traveling to, would become a cornerstone in her heart.

Zeller owns Long Ridge Farm in Westmoreland and specializes in naturally dyed fibers and textiles. A few years ago, one of her friends, who was studying to be a trauma counselor, took an internship in Rwanda. Initially, Zeller was concerned for her friend, but her worries turned to curiosity as they corresponded. Her friend told her what an amazing place it was, and Zeller decided it was time for a trip. "I went over to find out why she liked it," she explains.

During Zeller's stay, she was invited to teach and met with a group of 40 widows, many of whom had been deeply impacted by the genocide. "They all work in this little cooperative with washing, carding, and spinning wool," Zeller

describes. She taught them the basics of natural dyeing and says: "That was how it began."

During that first visit in 2013, Zeller recalls, "It was sort of instant." She can't explain her immediate attachment to Rwanda, but it happened. And though it was an astounding experience, she notes that it was also challenging because the place is so different and she couldn't speak the language.

However, that did not hinder her desire to go back. She says, "I just had to do something... Probably God had his hand in this one." When she came home, she immersed herself in books and films about the history of Rwanda. "I needed to know what had happened there if I was going to go back," she explains. She cried a lot as she began to truly understand what Rwanda's people had been through.

In the spring of 2014, a young man she had met there and kept in touch with wrote that his family's cow had died. The matriarch of his family, the grandmother, was caring for many people because she had lost several children to malaria,

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A grandmother and her grandchild. On right, a red and orange dyed wrap. Photos courtesy of Nancy Zeller.



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childbirth, and genocide. As a sole source of protein for the babies, the cow's milk was a vital piece of the family's survival. Zeller decided she could help.

"I put it on Facebook, and everybody responded," she explains. "We raised \$1,100 in no time; it was just shocking to me." She took the money and returned to Rwanda for three weeks, where she was introduced to the family. "We just started developing this trust sort of relationship," she says. Zeller started thinking about what else she could do. "That was the beginning of Rwanda-one4one," she remembers.

Rwanda-one4one is the name Zeller chose for her work with the Rwandan family to help lift them out of poverty and create income opportunities for them. Her approach is twofold. She has continued to raise money to improve their lives by fixing and upgrading their home, paying school fees, and getting water to the house.

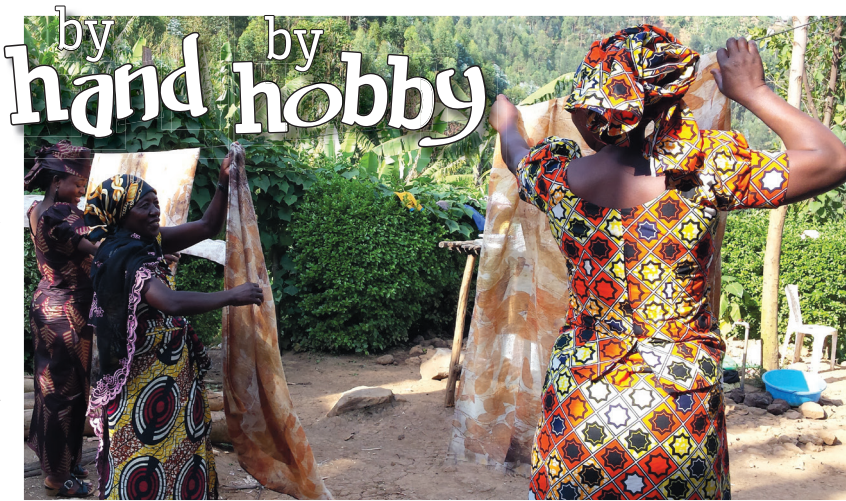
She also made an arrangement with a university in Rwanda so she could study the plants in their botanical gardens and test them out as natural dyes. "There's many things to dye with there, many tropical plants," she

describes. In 2015, she conducted research for two months, and out of that project, UMVA was born. Umva means "listen" in Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda, and it's the name that's been given to the line of naturally dyed textiles created by the women in Zeller's Rwanda-one4one family.

Now available in several shops in both Rwanda and America, UMVA's striking colors and strong message of positivity are spreading. This September, the naturally dyed fabrics will even appear on the runway at a major fashion show in Rwanda. As it

grows, UMVA provides ongoing financial opportunities for the Rwandan family Zeller has become so deeply connected with.

To see the gorgeous, hand-dyed wraps, visit the Hannah Grimes Marketplace in Keene. And to learn more about Zeller's work, Rwanda-one4one, and UMVA, go to www.longridge-farm.com.



Hanging wraps to dry.