

# Art Education by Chantaie Allick

The benefits of arts education has been hotly debated in papers, books and schools the world around. But there are people here in Rwanda who see and have lived the benefit of teaching art to kids beyond the usual developmental reasons .

Art education is not common in Rwanda. It doesn't exist at all in the public school system and only to a limited extent in private schools. Yet there is an eager and burgeoning thirst for art in Rwandans of all ages. A number of grass root programs are working to address that lack.

Collin Sekajugo the founder of Ivuka Arts in Kigali is one of those people. "I think that Art should be included in the school curriculum right from primary school to tertiary school level," he said. "I strongly believe that art is very vital in every aspect of the development of a country. You find that art is used in all different disciplines that build our societies, whether in culture or technology."

In his view, many important elements of life are artistic endeavours. For a country like Rwanda that is developing rapidly within an East African context, arts and education in the field among its children is just another step in that process.

In Kigali and throughout Rwanda there are initiatives that have recognized the value of teaching art to the next generation. American photojournalist, Linda Smith, is also among the tribe of people who see Potential in the arts education for Rwandan children.

Four years ago, Smith began Through the Eyes of Hope, a grass roots initiative that aims to provide photography as a means of therapy and expression for Rwandan children, with her Rwandan partner.

She went into a local primary school to teach photography to some of the children. The kids were elected by their peers and were children who needed the type of therapeutic outlet that the arts can provide. The genocide, HIV or other situations that demanded a channel had affected many of them.

What began as a two-week project has flourished into a long-term effort that allows kids to express themselves artistically and generate income to pay for school fees and help support their families. Smith provided them with basic knowledge of how to use the cameras and the equipment and was surprised by the results. They were good.

Some of the images captured by these children who range in age are shocking in their visual impact. "I said to myself something's going on here so I have to find a way to make this sustainable," said Smith. For the past four years they have been trying to do just that.

The benefits of programs like these go beyond personal expression.

"It's a way for them to use a practical skill to pay for food and some school fees—that's been the biggest part I think," explained Smith. Some of the kids who have graduated from school have started their own businesses taking photos.

Eric Ntuware, 20, who started in the program when he was 16 has reaped many of the benefits of this unique initiative. He says it helps the children of Rwanda who participate, especially those without parents or families. The skills they've learned with Smith helps provide security.

"It is a very practical," Ntuware said. "My family is fine now because I'm a student of photography and I'm teaching and working," he added. There's a beautiful complexity to the various ways in which arts education like this benefits the lives of children.

Sadly, the program lost one of its kids, Emile Iradukunda last year to an HIV-related illness. That event revealed the healing potential of the arts for some. "The kids were putting out how they were feeling about the loss of Emile through the arts. It's kind of their voices and emotions being put on through artistic mediums," explained Smith.

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Emile's death was also the catalyst that pushed her to formalize the program—he was part of the first group of children that Smith worked with. "His loss was huge for all of us," she said.

The children photograph weddings, portraits and scenes from their lives to share with buyers and interested locals. The group has regular shows in Rwanda and have also shown internationally in Canada and the United States. Their latest show is running at Heaven restaurant in Kigali.

Through the Eyes of Hope is one of many programs that have begun to appreciate the need for art in the lives of children in Rwanda. At Ivuka, Sekajugo has also created an initiative aimed towards children. He launched the Rwamakondera Children Group as an Ivuka Arts affiliate.

The program helps local children develop an appreciation for the arts while also learning to express themselves through different mediums including music, dance, drawing and painting.

"This has given the children an opportunity not only to heal from their day-to-day challenges, but it also provides them with hope for a better future," said Sekajugo.

No matter your stance on the value of arts education in schools, the clear benefit to the children in Rwanda who have had access to it is undeniable. The arts are growing in this country and these programs are preparing the next generation of Rwandan artists, musicians, entrepreneurs and trail blazers. It's a natural part of the growth and evolution of this dynamic East African nation. □







Rwamakondera Children's Dance Troupe performing during the Ivuka Arts Show at the US Embassy Kigali

**Edwina Sagitto** **Jennifer Foltz** **Charles Mugabo** - US Embassy Kigali,  
**Karin Koethefer** Goethe Institut Liaison Office Kigali **Ann Mazimphaka** UNDP  
 Rwanda, **Jessica McGhie** - Peace Corp Rwanda, **Elizabeth Sardin** - Freelancer,  
**Chantaie Allick** Toronto, **Amir Demeke** Bugesera Books Kigali, **Anna**  
**Gunnarson** - University of Essex UK, **Sarah Hipp** Intore Culture Center Kigali,  
**Carole Karemera** Ishyo Arts Center, **Marie Paula Muvunyi**, Fashion Designer  
 London, **Bruce Ramell** - visual artist - Leeds (UK), **Aimable Niyonzima** Visual  
 Arts - Kigali, **Charles Kizito** Ivuka Arts Kigali, **Hope Azeda** Mashirika Group,  
**Maria Ervaer** Royal Danish Embassy Kampala, **Alissa Ruxin** Heaven Restaurant  
 Kiyovu - Kigali, **Joe Kizza** - Weaver Bird - The artist's Village, **Sandra Idossou** Shei  
 & Enz Consultants, **Alex Kalisa** - Kigali Freelancer, **Arlette Vendeneycken** - Visual  
 Artist GTZ - Kigali, **Maureen Umutesi**, visual artist/fashion designer, Ivuka Arts Kigali,  
**Juliana Karungi** - Ivuka Arts Uganda, **Deborah Kezaab Kakoma** Kezaab  
 Branding Studio, **Ellie Kates** **Sarah Dunigan** - RAFTA (Rwanda Nziza)