Sister Ann Builds Her Dream School

A NUN FROM SOUTH BOSTON HAS ACQUIRED LAND IN RWANDA TO BUILD A FREE MIDDLE SCHOOL FOR GIRLS 10 YEARS AFTER THE GENOCIDE THAT KILLED 800,000 PEOPLE. HERE, THE AUTHOR JOINS THE NUN ON WHAT PROVES TO BE A REMARKABLE JOURNEY.

Story and Photographs by Louisa Kasdon Sidell

THE WRITE STUFF Girls from a secondary school in Nyamata, Rwanda, eager to improve their English, fill Sister Ann Fox' s notebook with their e-mail addresses.

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THE LAND WHERE we're all standing is an empty field in a village of central Africa, where cows are grazing and a teenage mother with a baby wrapped around her back is gathering twigs for the fire. Some children are playing soccer in an open space, though the ball looks more like a wad of Scotch tape. "Regardez-moi, muzungu!" ("Look at me, white people!"), a boy, maybe he's 11, shouts at me, pointing at my big camera as he bounces the ball off his chest. F It is early February, and a real estate scene is unfolding that, aside from the players involved, seems no different than a Boston couple hunting for land to build their dream home and meeting with a developer at a potential property. The clients are a silver-haired, rosy-cheeked 70-year-old nun from South Boston and her companion, a tall, gray-haired former Boston city councilor and son of a former Boston mayor. They are meeting with the mayor of Nyamata, his advisers, and an architect. There is gesticulating and pointing out of natural features. "See, it slopes here," the mayor says. "The power line will go there." The architect pulls out a plain white envelope and sketches a plot plan on the back. "It's not enough space," he says. One hectare is too small. At least 3 hectares, or 8 acres, is needed. The mayor appears ready to agree to anything if this American nun is going to do what she's promised him. "OK," the mayor says. "Whatever you need."

And just like that, without any paperwork being signed or leases being transferred or loans being approved, Sister Ann Fox from South Boston has acquired the rights to 8 acres of public land in very rural, very poor Nyamata, Rwanda, to build a tuition-free middle school for girls.

IT WAS IN DECEMBER 1999 that Sister Ann, as everyone calls her, was invited to participate in a new program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government launched by former US ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt, called Women Waging Peace. The objective was to identify and develop an international network of female peacemakers from conflict areas around the world, and bring them annually to Cambridge, where they would draw support from one another in their efforts to influence international policy shapers.

It struck Sister Ann as a little odd that South Boston would be listed as a conflict area, along with Sri Lanka, Colombia, the Middle East, Bosnia, and Rwanda. But she says she reasoned, "They just needed somebody local." So the following year, she attended the colloquium , and as the local hostess, she decided to put on a classic, church-basement-style Thanksgiving dinner – complete with pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce – at the Paraclete Center in South Boston for all of the female delegates. "It was a total success," she recalls. "Everyone came. They wanted to meet regular American moms and their kids."

Sister Ann, her smile as broad as L Street Beach, connected instantly with one woman in particular, Aloisea Inyumba, now the governor of one of the poorest areas in Rwanda, Kigali-Ngali province, whose Tutsi population was decimated in the Rwandan genocide. Irish nuns in Rwanda had educated Aloisea, a Tutsi who had survived the genocide in April 1994. The country's two largest tribes, the Tutsis and Hutus, after years of living together in central Africa, speaking the same language and even intermarrying, erupted in ethnic violence that ended with the Hutus slaughtering 800,000 civilians – most of them Tutsi men, women, and children. In Nyamata, as many as 10,000 Tutsis were murdered where they had massed for protection, inside the church walls and within the walls of the pastor's house. Ten thousand more Tutsis – some say a conservative estimate – were hunted down and killed in the hills surrounding the village. Nyamata, a remote district in Aloisea's province, sustained some of the worst genocidal violence against Tutsis.

As Aloisea spent more time with Sister Ann, she envisioned her as the perfect choice – a feisty American nun with a gift for institution-building and reaching out to children to help Rwanda mold its girls – many of whom lost their parents in the genocide, into the next generation of the country's female leaders. Aloisea invited Sister Ann to fly to Rwanda, and a mission was born.

ANN FOX DOESN'T look like a nun. She does not wear a habit. She doesn't bustle; in fact she has a hazy, distracted style that suggests that if she wants to find her gloves, she should pin them to her coat. She grew up in rural Michigan and was a sorority girl at the University of Michigan. She moved to New York in the 1950s when writers and activists such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day were reinvigorating the Catholic intellectual agenda.

A social worker by vocation, Fox found her mission in activist Catholicism. She converted and took her vows as a Sister of Charity, an order that was founded to get nuns out in the community. When the Vatican II church reforms came along in the 1960s, Sister Ann saw it as a "freeing opportunity for the church." The Sisters of Charity did not.

Their response was to become more cloistered, more conservative. Sister Ann resisted.

Through a newly revived rite of consecration, she

THE STORY IN PICTURES

1 /// Former Boston city councilor Barry T. Hynes is raising money for Sister Ann's school and joined her on the trip.

2 /// The building where the mayor of Nyamata works.

3 /// Sister Ann meeting with Nyamata Mayor Francis Nkurunziza, who controls the land for her school.

4 /// The mayor and his advisers work out the details for Sister Ann's school.

5 /// Sister Ann's legal adviser in Rwanda, Apophia K. Twiine, who helps her with the required paperwork.

6 /// Sister Ann meets with an architect and a Nyamata official on the land where her middle school will be built.

7 /// Playful boys run up to the camera-toting author and shout, "Regardez-moi, muzungu," roughly translated as "Look at me, white people."

8 /// Linda Schwabe, the cooking instructor at Sister Ann's Boston Paraclete Center, huddles with the nun at the Nyamata site.

9 /// When Sister Ann explains how much land she needs for the school, the Rwandan architect with her group begins sketching.

Rwanda

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A SIGN OF THE TIMES This sign outside the church in Nyamata where a genocide memorial has been built reads: "If you knew me, and you knew yourself, you would not have killed me."

would shed her habit and agree to live outside her order, support herself, and minister in the community. At the invitation of Boston's Cardinal Richard Cushing, she moved to the Bromley-Heath public housing development in the late 1960s to run an educational program for welfare mothers. From Bromley-Heath, she wended her way to South Boston in 1987, where she became executive director of South Boston Neighborhood House. Finally, in 1997, Sister Ann cofounded The Paraclete Center, an after-school enrichment program for urban children. She opened it in a former convent, and The Paraclete Center came to serve 500 children, largely on the strength of money raised through grass-roots efforts.

But it wasn't until one year after agreeing to help Aloisea that Sister Ann was ready to pack her bags for Africa. The third session of Women Waging Peace was approaching, and Aloisea was returning to Cambridge and the Kennedy School. Linda Schwabe, a Paraclete children's cooking instructor, told Sister Ann, "You can't put her off again. It's embarrassing for Aloisea to have to ask twice." In June 2002, with little ceremony and even less preparation, Schwabe and Sister Ann got their yellow fever shots and prescriptions for malaria pills, and made the 21-hour trip to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. A second trip followed in June 2003, and by last fall, Aloisea had chosen an area in the Nyamata District to build a new girls school.

Sister Ann characterizes herself more as doer than talker. But she manages to explain what impassioned her about this project. "I looked at the faces of the people I met in Rwanda, and I realized that the American leadership and the Catholic Church had really let them down. I had to do something. I couldn't just walk away."

But she couldn't do it alone, either. She needed money. She turned to the chairman of the board at the Paraclete Center, Barry Hynes, a former Boston city councilor and son of former Boston mayor John B. Hynes. "I needed something tangible for people to see, to raise any money," he says. Such as an architectural rendering of the school with floor plans. Hynes approached fellow Notre Dame alumnus, architect Dennis Keefe of S/L/A/M Collaborative in Cambridge, and asked him draw up some plans, for free.

By February 2004, Sister Ann and Hynes were ready for the next step: a formal visit with the mayor of Nyamata to pick the site for the school and to get an endorsement from the minister of education. They also had to find a Rwandan lawyer to handle the legalities and a Rwandan designate to manage the construction process.

This is where I tagged along.

THE VIEW OF RWANDA from the plane is a palette of lush colors – green jungle and red earth, with conical hills jutting up. Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, but flying into Kigali during the day, it looks like a small city with sparse population surrounded by a virgin jungle. At sunset, though, the dark hills around Kigali sparkle with tiny lights, like phosphorescent jimmies liberally strewn over an ice cream cone. The lights come from the houses and huts of the hundreds of thousands of Rwandans who live in secluded villages and farms outside the city. Hynes, a tall white guy from South Boston sporting a baseball cap, and Sister Ann, as shining white as ivory, step into the Kigali airport and immediately attract stares.

Sister Anna Beata Murekatete comes to fetch us at the airport. In 2002, she had left behind the 800-student boarding school in Butare, Rwanda, that she runs to spend six months in Boston, as an educator in residence at the Paraclete Center. She commandeers our little entourage with an authority that would cow almost anyone. We collect our bags, board the vans, and take to the road. Sister Anna wears the light-blue habit of her order, the Benebekira Sisters – and a tall white veil that gives a vertical authority to her soft physical presence. Once in Kigali, we head to our rooms and unpack, while a woman in the village changes our US $100 bills into Rwandan currency. She has her stash of currency stacked in a blue plastic bag and exchanges my slim stack of US dollars for a wad – the classic big bankroll. The rate: 500 Rwandan francs are equivalent to one US dollar.

Sister Anna has arranged a van and driver for the next day so we can visit the mayor of Nyamata and Sister Ann can ask about the land for the school. But the mayor has a meeting in Kigali and can't see us until the afternoon. We will tour Kigali in the morning and

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head off to Nyamata after lunch. Aime Kabandana (a Rwandan architect in Sister Ann's party) joins us as our travel guide for the day. As part of his tour, much as a guide in Boston might point out the golden State House dome, he directs us to the holes in the Parliament building made by cannons during the ethnic fighting. And the open field over there, he points, that's where the army and militia assembled before they struck out on their horrific raids during the 1994 genocide.

After lunch (at a Chinese restaurant complete with red paper lanterns), we are off to Nyamata. Sister Ann will present the plans and formally request land for the school. It's a challenging drive. The roads to Nyamata were never paved because this was a Tutsi region, and therefore it received lowest priority for infrastructure repair. It takes about an hour and a half to get to Nyamata. The driver has to focus on the road in increments to avoid cracking an axle on the ruts. The city limits fade and the forests of Rwanda begin.

Our guide says that the creek on our left is the source of the Nile. The idea that the source of the Nile is some thin creek in Rwanda tickles me, but it is tied to the major anthropological myth or conjecture or theory that created the two dominant tribes – the Tutsis and the Hutus. By tradition, the Tutsis were a Nilotic people who traveled down the Nile from Sudan and Ethiopia to Rwanda and Burundi. The Hutus, by the same logic, were the indigenous residents. While the two ethnically distinct tribes have mixed, the physical stereotypes remain. The stereotypical Tutsis are held to be elongated people – lanky and thin – with lighter

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skin, longer faces, straighter hair, and sharper noses. The Hutus are supposed to be rounder and shorter. Centuries of intermarriage have muted the distinctions. As an outsider, I can't tell. All I see are Rwandans.

WHEN WE ARRIVE in Nyamata, the mayor is still in Kigali. His meeting has run late. There's not much to do. We have a few hours, and the obvious destination is the genocide memorial at the church. Before 1994, Nyamata was considered a Tutsi region. Ten years later, less than 5 percent of Nyamata's population is Tutsi, residents say. The church and the grounds have been established as a genocide memorial. A new church complex has been built 50 yards beyond.

The sign outside the church entrance reads in Kinyarwanda, the local language, "If you knew me, and you knew yourself, you would not have killed me."

Nothing feels real about seeing a room stacked with skulls, femurs, pelvises, and finger bones. Some skulls still have bloodstained turbans wrapped tightly around them after being disinterred 10 years later from the mass graves or the ditches in the hills where the Hutu militia dumped the bodies. What had it been used for before? A sacristy? An office? To just look and move on seems cold, but to take photos feels almost perverse. But I take the picture, and I listen as our guide points out the horrors. The dried bloodstains, gone black, on the ceilings created by heads exploding when the grenades hit. The bloodstains on the altar cloth, on the pew benches. The guide says he was there that night. I can't bring myself to ask what role he played. I haven't yet understood that every Rwandan wants to tell his or her story.

CHILDREN OF A LOST GENERATION Many of the girls who may attend Sister Ann's school lost their parents in the 1994 genocide in which government-backed violence left 800,000 victims dead, most of them Tutsis.

In the church basement, there is a glass pyramid with a display of skulls arranged like vases on the top tier, arm bones on the next level, moving on down the body to the toes, as if the skeletons, like Legos, could be reassembled to trudge up the

stairs. The skulls are mostly intact, but at least every third one has a big chunk missing where a machete or a grenade made contact.

I have so many questions for our guide, Rwema. Our mutual language is French, and each of us struggles with translating and comprehending powerful emotions through the filter of our respective accents. “Is it finished now, the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis?” Yes and no, he answers. He pulls out his new national identity card to show me that it no longer indicates his tribal origin. Where it used to say “Male, Tutsi,” it now reads only “Male, Rwandan.” Rwema says he believes that in another two or three generations, Rwandans will forget who is a Tutsi and who is a Hutu. But he’s not sure. “For good things and bad things,” he says, “Rwandans have very long memories.”

MAYOR FRANCIS Nkurunziza is back. We go to his office, a small, cluttered government room in the *Akarere Ka Nyamata*, a low building that is Nyamata’s City Hall. One lone soldier with an automatic rifle patrols the parking lot, which contains our van, the mayor’s light-blue SUV, two children on bikes, and three young girls wearing their school uniforms. Like a formal delegation visiting a head of state, we sit down in rows on chairs in the mayor’s office.

He looks attentive as Sister Ann presents the architectural plans for the school. The mayor says he is thrilled that someone wants to do anything for Nyamata, because it needs so much and is offered so little. He listens politely as Sister Ann talks about empowering girls and the necessity of building leadership skills in girls at the middle-school level.

But he’s not sold on the idea of a girls’ school and would prefer a coed vocational high school. On the other hand, there’s been so little interest in helping Nyamata that

SOLUTION TO LAST WEEK’S PUZZLE

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Rwanda

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MEETING OF THE MINDS Sister Ann Fox and the mayor of Nyamata meet on the land where her school will be built. "We'll give you all the land you need," he told his visitor. "In Nyamata, land is never a problem. All we have is empty space."

he's reluctant to turn down this gift. "We'll give you all the land you need," he says. "In Nyamata, land is never the problem. All we have is empty space. We have enough land for you to build a university if you want." The mayor knows just where the school should go. Not far from where the airport will be built. It will have a road, electricity, and running water. The mayor picks up his cellphone to call his deputies. Evidently, we need to go right now to look at a location he has in mind. "Let's start. Let's go," the mayor says. "I want a school."

THE SITE IS FIVE minutes away on a hill, and by the time our visit there is finished, Sister Ann, Hynes, the mayor, his advisers, and the architect have agreed they will need at least 8 acres to do this right.

A few days later in Butare, Sister Ann and Hynes are going to meet their legal advisers at the National University. A young law school staff member, Olivier Rukundakuvuga, escorts us to the legal aid office, a small adobe building in the middle of campus. Apophia K. Twiine, first secretary of the law school – the equivalent to a dean of students – joins us. Striking, 28, and the mother of an infant, Apophia is dressed for work, in a brightly striped skirt and blouse with a matching headdress. Apophia went to university in Ottawa, and her English is superb.

"The floor is open," Apophia says.

Sister Ann opens a manila folder she has brought with her from South Boston. It is neatly stacked with brochures describing the Paraclete Center, its standing as a not-for-profit group in the United States, the articles of incorporation for the Paraclete Center, and a spiral-bound book of building plans for the Rwandan school. She explains that she needs legal representation to register the Paraclete Center in Rwanda as an NGO, a non-governmental organization, so that she can have a legal presence in the country. Also, she needs legal papers for the land that the mayor of Nyamata has promised.

"It's very simple to acquire land in Rwanda," Apophia says as she riffles through the papers. "The deeds and transfers are written so simply that even the dead can read them." Olivier explains that Sister Ann will need to get a letter from the mayor of Nyamata assigning her the rights to the land, and specifying the location and dimensions of the property. Apophia will supervise. They will contact Sister Ann by e-mail when they are ready to speak to the mayor in Nyamata.

It was, in fact, a fairly standard lawyer-

client first meeting, setting aside who the players were: a 70-year-old nun from South Boston and a traditionally dressed, beautiful young woman from central Africa.

Sister Ann's last stop is with the minister of education for Rwanda. She's worried that he might not support the idea of a girls' day school, preferring either a boarding school or at the least a coed school.

The minister, Romain Murenzi, is a Rwandan expatriate who was a college professor in Atlanta before his return to Rwanda. He is ecstatically supportive. He loves the idea of a school for girls in grades 7 to 9 that will give the students a strong foundation in computers, English, and technical skills as well as certifying them for secondary school. Compulsory grade-school education is relatively new in Rwanda, and parents are far more likely to enroll their sons than their daughters in school beyond the sixth grade.

Murenzi suggests that the school might have to offer dormitories for Monday-through-Thursday boarding since the distances from home to school may be too great for young girls to make as a daily commute. (In Rwanda, not only are there no school buses, there are no ambulances either.) Whatever Sister Ann needs – a letter of endorsement or calls to the right people – the minister tells her she has his support.

BACK IN SOUTH BOSTON in March, Sister Ann sums up her trip: "Mission accomplished." They found a building site, consulted a lawyer, and even located a Rwandan project manager. Straton Malisaba, an English-speaking Marist brother who is the principal of a top-ranked technical and scientific boarding school in Rwanda, has agreed to oversee the project. The costs seem controllable, somewhere in the neighborhood of $200,000 to build. Land is free, labor is cheap, and Rwanda has no building codes for school construction. Sister Ann hopes that construction will begin in the next six months and that the first class of girls will be enrolled at the Nyamata campus of the Paraclete Center in time for the 2005 school year. The school still exists only on paper and in her head, and the biggest challenges – fund-raising, building, hiring and training teachers, and creating a curriculum – lie ahead. BG

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