

# Station School Rwanda



## *A Decade of 'Difference Making' By Our Parish Community*

Most of us have heard overseas missionaries at Sunday Mass. Often, they vividly sketch conditions that we find unsettling. And, in response, many of us donate. However, with rare exceptions, we quickly forget about that missionary. This story is about one of these exceptions.

The setting is the then St. Tarcissus parish in 2013 when Father Pascal Bigirimana described the needs of the Rwandan parish, St. Maria Goretti, which St. Tarcissus was assisting through its "sharing parish" program.

On this particular occasion, Barbara "Bobbie" DuMelle, a native Chicagoan and parishioner of 24 years, felt compelled to visit with Father Pascal after Mass and inquire how she could get involved to help.

DuMelle wanted to make sure that donations intended for this parish were not ending up in the pockets of people she calls "bad actors."

In addition, DuMelle sought the counsel of Father Michael Solazzo, the St. Tarcissus pastor, and conducted her own research.



*A decade ago, when DuMelle arrived at Station School, Rwanda, she vividly recalls meeting the children: poor, sad, and hungry. Many did not meet the requirement to have shoes and had to simply watch and listen while others attended class.*



## *Taking Action*

This brought DuMelle to a faith-inspired decision: *To go to Rwanda to learn firsthand how to best help our sharing parish.*

Not surprisingly, her plan to book a 20-hour flight to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, was met with skepticism by friends and family. Undaunted, in May 2013, DuMelle departed from Chicago on KLM Airlines for the 7,000-mile journey.

The trip was scary, DuMelle recalls. However, she affirms that she totally put her trust in God and knew in her heart that everything would be OK.

Once in Rwanda, DuMelle met with the leaders of St. Maria Goretti. When asked what they needed, their shocking reply was, “We’re fine. But we are trying to help another school that has needs.”

That “needy” school was what DuMelle simply calls “Station School.” She describes it as “an outpost far from town.”

*But why help “Station School”?* That it had a dirt floor, inadequate supplies, no running water nor electrical service and that the students came from poor families are regrettably not unique.

However, as some might recall, what is tragically distinctive about Rwanda was its horrific civil war in the 1990’s that turned into a genocide. Upwards of one million people were indiscriminately killed in a matter of months. The painful scars of this devastation deeply affected the children and grandchildren of the survivors. Thus, the importance of forming future generations is profound.

## *The Station School Program is Born*

DuMelle’s “Station School” Program is different from donating to a visiting missionary because it is based on an individual sponsorship of one student. In other words, there is a direct connection between the sponsor here and a particular student there.

Furthermore, there is no bureaucratic infrastructure and governmental involvement is minimal. In brief, the program is simple, sustainable, and highly impactful.

Specifically, notes DuMelle, a \$25 sponsorship (a one-time investment with no commitment to renew) ensures that one student has the following for one year:

*two uniforms, shoes and socks, school sweater, school fees, supplies including a school bag, soap and lotions, and toothpaste.*

Following DuMelle’s launch of the Station School program in 2013, St. Tarcissus parishioners responded generously. And throughout the transition to becoming St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, that tradition of Christian charity has continued.



*Helping one child will not change the world, however, for that one child the world will be forever changed.*

## *Sustaining the Program*

If DuMelle’s initial in-person visit to Rwanda to start the program was remarkable, so, too, are her regular return visits during which she personally ensures its success by visiting the children and the administration. Upon her return, she publishes a progress report with photos in the parish bulletin and on the website.

How is the program going? DuMelle notes that the school has 1,500 students and teaches English (Kinyarwanda is the national language of Rwanda, which is a very Catholic country). Moreover, she adds tidbits such as: “The children love volleyball. And thanks to our generous support, they have shirts and equipment.”



*A game changer! Organized sports – with uniforms and proper equipment.*

While DuMelle is reticent to put a spotlight on her efforts, she readily boasts about the students.

For instance, she reports that two Station School students were awarded scholarships to attend a prestigious technical high school. Unlike the others enrolled there, the Station School students had never used a computer. They not only mastered its use, but went on to graduate #1 and #2.

What's more, since implementing the lunch program for students, the students have achieved a 33% climb in test scores.



*Lunch time!  
It might very well  
be the only meal  
that student has  
for the day.*

Similarly, DuMelle is unabashedly proud of the beautiful faith of the people and their Christian conviction to put their neighbor first. For example, when a child who has shoes receives a new pair, he or she is taught to give the new (not the used) pair to a child who has none.

It is such faith, she notes, that has enabled these families to move beyond the violence of the past and the challenges of serious poverty.



*We have given the gift of a brighter  
future and we have received the gift  
of an extended family.*

This emphasis on simplicity is underscored by DuMelle's intention not to incorporate nor create a separate "Station School" not-for-profit. And she does not engage in widespread publicity and marketing. Such measures, says DuMelle, would change the "one-to-one, person-to-person" character.

As for the gratitude, that's regularly expressed by the children in personal "thank you" notes sent to our local parish sponsors.

### *Two Continents United in Belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament*



*Nearly 10 years ago, this elegant wooden monstrance (now in the private chapel of the parish rectory) was given in gratitude by St. Maria Goretti parish, Rwanda, to the then St. Tarcissus parish. "In this year of the National Eucharistic Revival, this holy vessel reminds us that it is Jesus who ultimately unites us all as a community of believers wherever we live in the world," comments Father Michael Grisolan, pastor, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity.*



## Next Goals

“Our top priority is to ensure all new students have a sponsor. In addition, we emphatically want to continue the lunch program as this might be the only meal for that child. And, we are striving to maintain the scholarship program,” says the passionate-but-reserved DuMelle.

What’s more, she adds, “We’re raising funds to build a well, to be located less than a half-mile from the Station School, eliminating the need to depend on rain water collection.

“Currently,” DuMelle continues, “the trek to collect water is eight miles round trip. The new well will provide water for not only Station School, but also the surrounding area.”

Father Michael Grisolano, pastor, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, remarked, “The Station School Program helps

people in body and soul. It’s a concrete way for our parish to put the teaching of Jesus into practice.”

DuMelle beams, “The Station School students truly believe there are angels in Chicago.”



**Cover Photo:** Supplies arrive! The students never had back packs. DuMelle points out that they’re in front of them (not on their backs) to keep them close to their hearts.

*For more information, go to: <https://stelizabethtrinity.org/sharing-families-rwanda/>*



The St. Elizabeth of the Trinity sponsorships provide these children with education, food, and other basics. You also give love and hope to the children. Your gesture goes with what Jesus taught us. Thank you for putting the Word of God into action. The children so want to make you proud.

– Father Denis, Station School program liaison

*Station School headmistress (principal) and Rev. Father Denis Kizito Kiyeje, local parish priest and Station School program liaison.*

## What You Might Not Know About Rwanda

Our Lady of Kibeho, in southwestern Rwanda, is the only Vatican approved Marian apparition in Africa. The story and message of Our Lady (who called herself “Our Lady of the Word”) to three young girls in the 1980s is astonishing.

For more information, go to <http://www.kibeho-sanctuary.com/en/>, or a very readable history, *Our Lady of Kibeho, Mary Speaks to the World from the Heart of Africa*, by Immaculée Ilibagiza, with Steve Erwin; Hay House, Inc., N.Y., 2008.



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