

GRANTEE PROFILES

SPECIAL EDUCATION CENTER OF JANJA: RWANDA

Mobilizing Community, Government, and International Support for Children with Disabilities

Schooling, Physical Therapy, and Vocational Training Help Children Reach their Potential

The starter commanded “Runners to your marks!” as spectators at a northern Rwanda stadium for the Provincial Special Olympics applaud young athletes pushing themselves toward the finish line and their community toward greater acceptance and inclusion of the disabled.

At the award ceremony, Christine Nyiramihigo wipes the ochre dust from her legs and stands to receive her silver medal without needing her usual crutches, a testament to the care of her family and the support of the Special Education Center in Janja, Rwanda.

Formed in 2005 by community members from the Association for Christian Education in Peace Values (APAX), the Janja Center provides schooling and therapy for physically and mentally disabled children from northern Rwanda’s Gakenke district.

Housed in a church-donated building, this Firelight Foundation grantee is the only special education organization of its kind in northern Rwanda. The Center’s location is so remote that Janja staff have to travel nearly 25 miles by slow public transport to access the internet from internet cafes in the region’s main city of Musanze.

Historically, disabled children have been among Rwanda’s most vulnerable, seen as a burden to society and a source of shame to families. The numbers of disabled children have increased in recent years, including survivors of the genocide and civil war of the 1990s, who often have lasting physical or emotional impairments from the horror and violence.

But new policies are providing an opportunity for change. Among other recent reforms, a 2007 law gives Rwanda’s disabled children the right to an education. The government’s education ministry has also set special education as a strategic priority, with hopes for inclusive education in the future.

Despite a small budget and a short history, the Janja Center has nimbly formed alliances with government agencies and international organizations to quickly expand services for the region's disabled children and advocate for full inclusion in their communities.

"Where once these children were swept into orphanages or hidden away in shame, the Janja Center works to keep them at the center of their communities, involved in daily routines with responsibilities and expectations tailored to their potential," says Rosalie Nezien, Firelight Foundation program officer for Rwanda.

Over four years, Janja Center programs have grown to include daily classes and regular physical therapy serving nearly 150 students. Fifty-seven students from remote villages now live at the Center during the school year. The Center's extension workers travel throughout the district to bring regular physical therapy to another 322 children and training to their parents and caregivers.

By cultivating good relationships with government officials, the Center succeeded in getting the local district government to pay the salaries of 6 of their 14 staff and secured regular visits from public health workers for their students.

"District authorities, including the mayor, cannot drive through Janja without visiting the Center, regardless of the purpose of their visit to the area," comments Center Director Mukankubana Domina.

The Janja Center's headmistress is now seen as a local expert on child development and education, Domina reports. She is routinely invited "to participate in consultative meetings at the district as well as at the national ministry in charge of family promotion and the well-being of children and women." Because of the Center's visibility in the region, new organizations frequently visit to learn from the Center's methods.

Several international organizations have taken note of the Center's accomplishments and lent support. The Voluntary Service Organization, a UK-based NGO, sent professionals to help the Janja Center identify and register all disabled children in Gakenke district. The Dutch Liliane Fund sent personnel to train Center staff in physical therapy. Another nonprofit provided wheelchairs to several dozen children.

With support from the Firelight Foundation, the Janja Center purchased a water tank to improve the children's access to clean

water. Firelight also funded solar panels to provide electricity for the Center's office, dormitories, and classroom used as an evening study room.

One of the Janja Center's biggest strides has taken place in the surrounding neighborhoods, says Director Domina. Disabled children do not experience stigma and are now regularly seen in public—at the market, church services, and community celebrations.

"People are slowly coming to understand the importance and potential of inclusive education," says Domina, who credits the Center's open houses, open-door policy, and awareness-raising campaigns for the growing attitudinal change.

Mainstreaming is one of the Center's advocacy goals, and they offer teacher-training workshops on how to include children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. They have had some success with the children they reintegrated into public primary school after providing them with on-site education. "All eight students adapted easily into mainstream classrooms, making friends quickly and joining the other children in play," says Director Domina.

The disabled students also had unexpectedly strong grades: all achieved passing marks.

Christine's story with the Janja Center began long before her participation in the Special Olympics. At age 18, she came to the Center in 2005 with deformed legs and an intellectual disability. Her family had never been able to pay for medical care or send her to school.

The Janja Center advocated for Christine while providing physical therapy and teaching her to read, write, and do simple math. Eventually they arranged for her to undergo surgery to straighten her legs at an orthopedic hospital in distant Rilima, Rwanda. Now she is studying tailoring at the Center in the hopes of supporting herself in the future. Without the Center's far-reaching connections at multiple levels of society, Christine would not be holding a silver medal or taking measurements for her latest sewing project.

As the Special Olympics competition day ended and the crowds returned home to their cooking fires for tea and supper, it was readily apparent that Christine and her fellow competitors have something in

common beside their love of sport: each has a circle of support—parents, grandparents, siblings, neighbors, friends—to see them through challenges both on and off the field. Bolstering those circles of support is the Janja Center, which has called upon the community, the government, and international organizations to share the weight of this challenge by helping disabled students access the basic services that they need.

This grantee profile first appeared in the Firelight Foundation's Annual Report in October 2009. We've resurrected it on this day to commemorate tonight's opening of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver.