

Costumed Rwandan orphans wait to perform a dance during their graduation ceremony from ZOE's Orphan Empowerment Program.



GRADUATION DAY

These children had no food. Some survived by working essentially as slaves in the fields of neighbors, receiving barely enough food to survive as payment for a day's back-breaking work. Others survived by begging on the streets or stealing. Frequently they were sick with malaria. Outcasts in their community, they had no hope and no future. They told me that they lived like animals and accepted that they would die like animals. That was then. **This is now.**

by Greg Jenks, Executive Director

Fast forward three years, through group formations, mentor selections, income generating micro-grants, the message of the grace of Jesus Christ, and monthly trainings on things such as food security, farming, health, and hygiene, and you arrive at an amazing celebration. The orphans from Nyaraguru, Rwanda are graduating from ZOE's Orphan Empowerment

Program. 683 families totalling 1,765 children have successfully journeyed from a life of pain and poverty to hope and self-sufficiency.

In a remote area of the Nyaraguru district, I was privileged to join with nearly 200 of these orphans as they gave thanks to God and celebrated the change in their lives. It was a celebration unlike anything I have experienced.

With songs that offered praise to God

and thanks to ZOE Ministry, my visiting mission team and I were ushered into this festive occasion. As we heard their testimonies, we began to understand why they celebrated with such passion.

The young people were anxious to tell their stories, and several did, beginning with 18-year-old Jacqueline. She was only five years old when her mother died after having twice given birth to twins. This left young Jacqueline with

four younger siblings to care for, no relatives, and little support from the community. Jacqueline and her family survived by begging for food and scavenging through garbage.

"We suffered a lot when our parents died. I was confused and even angry against God," she recalled.

Eventually, she did find work carrying water for a woman in her community who made and sold sorghum drink (a nutritious, non-alcoholic malt beverage.) Jacqueline and her siblings were given the leftover waste for food – a by-product normally fed to pigs.

"Before, I didn't wish for anyone to have the same life I had. Now I wish every child could have the same life as I have now," she continued.

Through her participation in ZOE's empowerment program, Jacqueline now has a house, and is raising two cows, five goats, six rabbits, and two chickens.

"I have nice clothes. This [dress I am wearing] is not the only dress I have! My siblings are happy. I have been trained in tailoring and received a [sewing] machine. Today I am a big boss!" she exclaimed.

Jacqueline and her family were not the only ones benefiting from the training she received through ZOE. She has gone throughout her community, teaching families about the importance of sanitizing milk before drinking it. To help increase the availability of healthy milk, she started a small business of collecting, boiling, and selling milk. Community members often tell her how glad they are to have a place to buy safe milk to drink. Her Working Group helps her run the business, and now they all receive enough income to pay for school fees and supplies.

Next to share with the assembled group was 19-year-old Deo. He recounted his journey from being a homeless street kid to opening

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the most successful restaurant in his community, thanks in large part to the health, hygiene and small business training he received through ZOE's empowerment program. When the government came through to inspect the local restaurants, Deo's restaurant was the only one to pass inspection. The rest were shut down. He also had another announcement that brought resounding applause; this former street kid was now engaged to be married!

After the sharing their stories of success, the orphans presented a drama about the impact ZOE Ministry has had on their lives. Alternating between disturbing acts depicting abuse and mistreatment, alongside humorous vignettes of Rwandan life, the play ended with an air of triumph and hope for the future.

Following the play, Jacqueline preached to the assembled group. Drawing upon Matthew 25:13-22, she compared ZOE's empowerment program to the "boss" who had entrusted his servants with talents. She explained that it was very important that ZOE's staff and supporters know that she and the other orphans had been faithful with that which was entrusted to them.

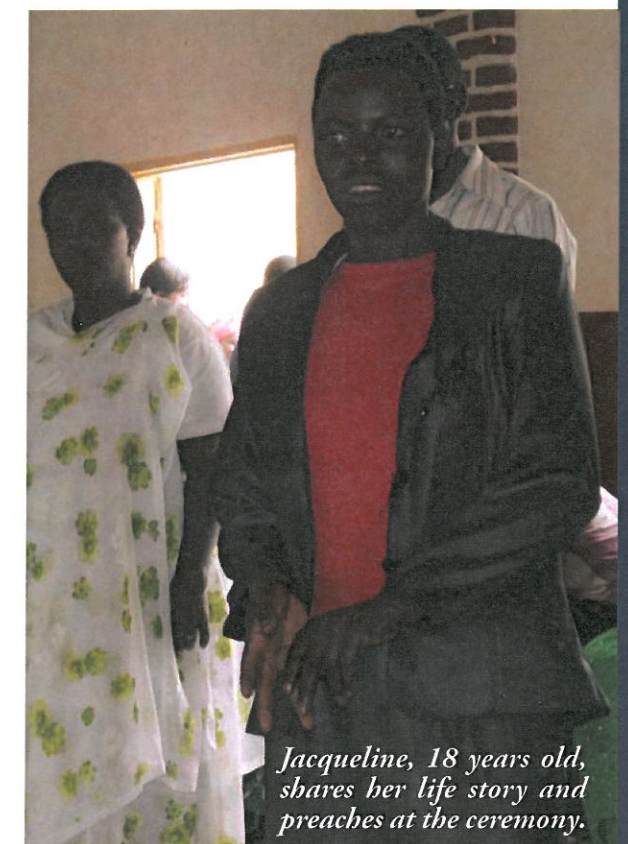
"We have multiplied our talents," she said. "We don't want to keep everything to ourselves but we want to share with community members who are in need."

Jacqueline then addressed the still-vulnerable members of the community who had been invited to the celebration. Although she and the other orphans had been exploited, abused, and neglected, Jacqueline reached out in a spirit of reconciliation and love.

"We will be willing to share anything. When you need vegetables, come to us. Anything you need we will share with you. Some may need milk, please come to us, we will share with you. Just trust God and remember that we are your brothers and sisters."

Then, 17 goats (worth approximately two years' wages) were brought in to the church. "Today we want to play the role of ZOE Ministry and help other community members," Jacqueline concluded.

This final moment of the ceremony was the most symbolic of their new lives. Once-starving orphans were now able to give 17 goats to the vulnerable people in their community to help them start their own journey out of poverty. ZOE's work with them is complete.



Jacqueline, 18 years old, shares her life story and preaches at the ceremony.