



# The Thrill of *Discovery*

Doug Weaver '11 and his wife, Kirsten,  
seek new adventures as Peace Corps  
volunteers in Rwanda

BY LAURA DAUGHERTY ■ PHOTOS BY DOUG WEAVER '11

The thrill of discovery drives many to travel abroad, but it takes a rare individual to do so in the service of others. For Peace Corps volunteers, Doug Weaver '11 and his wife, Kirsten, the thrill of discovery in their remote African village is as much about learning as it is teaching; it's about receiving as much as it is serving.



For Doug and Kirsten, applying to the Peace Corps was not a swift decision. "While I was a student at Columbia College, my wife saw a brochure for the Peace Corps at Mizzou (where she was a student)," he says. "She thought, 'that sounds like something Doug and I would do!' We prayed about it for a couple years and felt that it was the right thing for us. We are done with school, don't have careers yet, and don't have children yet. This is the perfect time for us to dedicate our lives to service, and through the Peace Corps, we can have a maximum impact on those with the greatest need."

After making the decision to apply to the Peace Corps, Doug and Kirsten were thrilled to discover they had been accepted — and were going to be serving in the continent they requested: Africa.

"We didn't know what to expect when we came here," says Doug of Rubengera, Rwanda, their placement for the next two years. "When we thought of Africa, we thought of a flat desert with elephants and lions ... but they call Rwanda the 'land of a thousand hills' for good reason. It is such a lush and beautiful country!

"Rwanda ended up being the perfect place for us," he adds. "We are both able to do jobs we are passionate about and qualified for. We love our placement, but we would have gone anywhere they chose for us."

To fulfill their assignment, Doug and Kirsten teach at the Rubengera Teacher Training College, a select boarding school for juniors and seniors in high school who express a desire to

become teachers. Doug explains the importance of students learning from and listening to native English speakers, as all classes in Rwanda must be taught in English. "This is the main reason we are here," he says.

But Doug and Kirsten are helping to improve more than just their students' English skills. Since most of their students will become teachers after they graduate, the teachers at Rubengera TTC emphasize nontraditional teaching methodologies in the hope their students will apply these methods to their teaching someday.

"Most schooling in Rwanda is rote memorization," Doug says. "They (the students) seem shocked and confused when we actually want them to participate in class. If we can impact how our students approach teaching

when they leave our school, then we could have a much larger impact on their students in their communities.

“Rwandan students are very dedicated to their studies,” Doug adds. “They are very inquisitive and eager to learn.”

As much as Doug and Kirsten spend their time teaching, they’re also students exploring their vibrant, oftentimes surprising, setting.

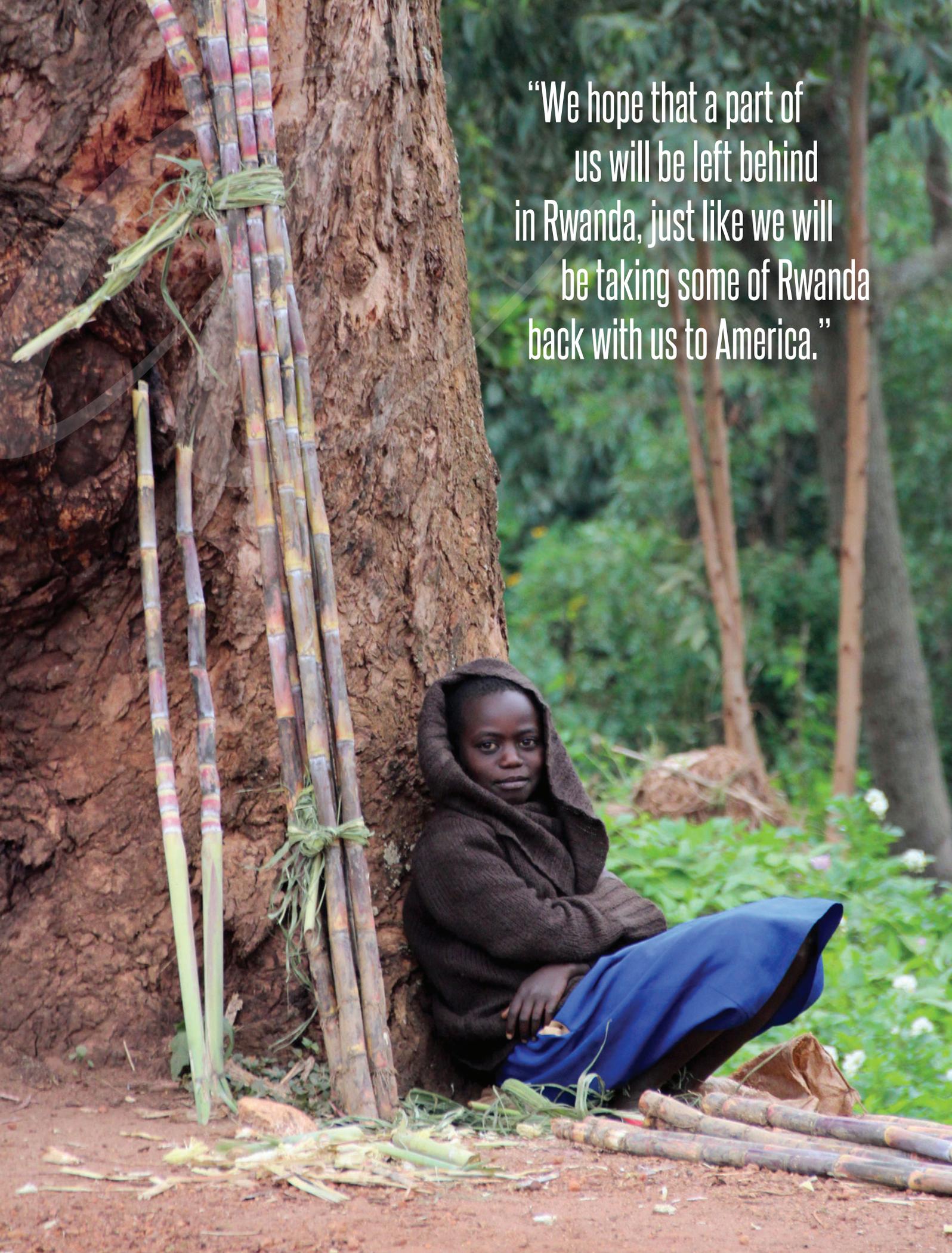
“We are sometimes surprised by how uniquely and almost stereotypically African some things are. I remember thinking, Wow! Women really do carry everything on their heads here! Taking a bus can also be quite a unique African experience. You find yourself crammed in a bus with someone else’s child on your lap. The woman next to you is breast-feeding, and somehow they just crammed four more people on the bus without it even coming to a stop. It is moments like this that you think to yourself, is this really my life now?”

Adapting to their new environment has been challenging, but not in the ways they anticipated. It only took a few weeks for them to adjust to living without electricity and plumbing, but integrating into their new community has proven much harder. “The



Kinyarwanda word for a white person is ‘muzungu,’ which also means ‘rich person,’ Doug says. “We have dollar signs written all over our skin. I planted a garden here, and when I bought a hoe and walked back home with it, the community gawked at me. I could hear them saying, ‘Muzungu, azi guterra’ (‘The white person knows how to

cultivate’) with perplexed looks on their faces. They think that all Americans have servants who do everything for them, so they are shocked when we do normal activities like laundry, cooking or housework. It doesn’t help that most white people they see are tourists, who stay at nice hotels and give money and candy to children. It’s hard not to feel

A young girl with dark skin and hair is sitting on the ground, leaning against the base of a large tree trunk. She is wearing a brown hooded sweater and a blue skirt. To her left, several harvested sugarcane stalks are bundled together and leaning against the tree. The ground is reddish-brown soil, and there are some green plants and a brown bag nearby. The background shows a lush green forest with many trees.

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guilty about how privileged we really are.”

Another difficulty of serving in Rwanda relates to the Rwandan Genocide. Although the genocide occurred 20 years ago and the country has significantly recovered in that time, some scars remain. For Rwandans, “it is not uncommon for your next-door neighbor to be a person who aided in murdering one of your family members or friends,” Doug says. “They (the Rwandans) do a surprisingly good job of holding the community together.”

Even so, the memories of the genocide have ways of cropping up when Doug and Kirsten least expect it. During a recent visit to their next-door neighbor, Doug and Kirsten were sharing family photographs with the neighbor when he told them his grandparents had died in the genocide. The neighbor explained how children and the

elderly were taken into the street — right in front of Doug and Kirsten’s home — and murdered.

“It’s difficult to know how to respond in these situations,” Doug says. “We can’t really comprehend what they have gone through. On most days, the genocide doesn’t come up because they try very hard to put their past behind them, but its presence is always here.”

One way Doug is able to process his experiences in Rwanda is through painting, but even this favorite pursuit of his had to be adjusted to his new environment. Since most painting supplies aren’t allowed on airplanes, Doug has resorted to making his supplies with vegetable oil, dirt, beeswax and even eggs from the market.

“Everything I paint here literally has a little bit of Rwanda in it. Many Peace Corps volunteers blog about their experiences, but

this is how I document it. It helps me reflect on my experiences, and hopefully can teach others about Rwanda and the Peace Corps.”

When asked what Doug and Kirsten hope to gain from their experience in Rwanda, they are, above all else, open to learning and growing. “We have a lot of the same goals as we would in any other period of our lives,” Doug says. “We want to do our jobs to the best of our abilities. We hope to build meaningful and lasting relationships. We hope to get closer to God. We hope that after two years our community will be better off than before we came. We hope that a part of us will be left behind in Rwanda, just like we will be taking some of Rwanda back with us to America. If nothing else, living here broadens our view of the world.”

After all, the best teachers never stop learning. *d*