

The Crocheters of Imbabazi

Cari Clement

The small East African country of Rwanda is known primarily for its tragic history of genocide; however, it is emerging from that shadow through its determined, focused, exceptionally hard-working, and creative people. This cannot be more evident than at Rosamund Carr's Imbabazi (translation: a mother's love) Orphanage, home to over one hundred children and located in beautiful Gisenyi on the shores of Lake Kivu, one of the Great Lakes of Africa. Roz, a ninety-four-year-young American woman and former buddy of Dian Fossey (*Gorillas in the Mist*), has been in Rwanda since she was in her thirties. Having been forced to leave Rwanda during the months of the genocide, she returned in late 1994 and started the orphanage to provide a home for genocide orphans. Roz's kids are a talented bunch, especially the girls, whose hierarchy in the orphanage seems to be determined by the girls' skill level in crochet. They walk around the orphanage, skeins of yarn under their arms, chatting, fingers and hooks flying.

To assist in keeping the crochet legacy thriving, Cari Clement, Caron International's director of fashion and design, brought the girls five suitcases loaded with Simply Soft yarn donated by Caron. Visitors to Imbabazi often bring yarn, but rarely are they crocheters. When Cari asked in January 2005 what she could bring on her next visit there, Roz told her, "We can always use yarn, but we would also like it if you could teach the girls some new stitches." When Cari returned that September, she taught the girls how to do a flower granny square, and, before the class was over, the girls were fast at work making the flowers for a "team" afghan (since everyone could contribute squares unlike those making complete afghans).

The kids are split up into "animal teams" (Tiger Team, Giraffe Team, etc.) that compete with each other in crafts, sports, and other activities. The team idea is not only

fun for the kids, but it encourages them to learn new skills and match wits, and it brings additional income to the group. The crocheted afghans (products developed more



Above left: Cari Clement gives hands-on instruction to the children of Imbabazi Orphanage. Upper right and at right: Residents crocheting for their team afghans.

from occupational therapy than for serious income generation) made by the various team members provide Roz's visitors with treasured souvenirs of their visits there.

"It was such fun showing such enthusiastic and smart girls this new pattern! Their focus was totally on the learning, and, when they got it, they took endless joy in correcting the mistakes I would make while I was chatting with them (they learn English at their school). These kids have been through so much—as most of the children are the age where they would've lost all of their families to the genocide, a memory far beyond what any of us could possibly imagine—that laughing with them was an especially poignant treat for me. I'll be returning to Rwanda and Imbabazi in January and May of 2007 and beyond, I hope, with other crocheters to show the girls even more stitches and have more laughs!"



Photographs by Cari Clement



Since Cari was at Imbabazi, the orphanage has relocated from Gisenyi to Roz's farm, which she's owned since 1947 but had to evacuate due to security concerns. The area now is peaceful and stable, prompting Imbabazi's return.

For more information, visit www.rwandaproject.org or <http://iafrica.imdb.com/name/nm1061096/bio>. There is also a documentary film of Roz's life currently in production.

CARI CLEMENT is the director of fashion and design for Caron International.