

Spotlight on Michael Heater

Master of Science in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 2013

Learning by Teaching in Rwanda: Alumnus Michael Heater Takes Planning Knowledge to a Rural Village

Paul Donegan

MCRP student, Cal Poly

MCRP Alumnus Michael Heater is exemplary in combining CRP's practical community-oriented approach with the planning profession's noble mission of helping populations in need. For the last couple of years, Michael and his wife GraceAnne have been working as Peace Corps volunteers, making sure that they make a difference in a small village in Rwanda.

San Luis Obispo is often considered to be a rural and secluded corner of a bustling state. Regardless of how isolated it is perceived, this quality is what makes the area unique, and so well loved. In 2013, Michael Heater graduated from Cal Poly with his master's in City and Regional Planning, completing the program amongst the iconic rolling green hills of the Central Coast, where rush hour traffic hasn't begun to dominate.

Today, he and his wife GraceAnne, might not find San Luis Obispo to be as remote as it is sometimes considered. Together they now live in Murunda, a small village on the west coast of Rwanda, a grueling four hours by bus and motorcycle from the capital city of Kigali. Here, once again beneath rolling green hills and a relaxed pace of life, the couple teaches English as Peace Corps volunteers.

Rwanda is a very small country (about the size of Maryland), but it has a population of about 12 million, which makes it one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. Rwanda lies a few degrees south of the equator but has lower temperatures than are typical for equatorial countries because of its high elevation. There are two rainy seasons in the year; the first runs from February to June and the second from September to December. Coffee and tea are the major cash crops for export.



Michael, wife GraceAnne and their host sisters, in front of the school in Murunda.

The cuisine of Rwanda is based on local staple foods such as bananas, plantains, sweet potatoes, beans, and cassava. Rwanda is one of only two countries in which mountain gorillas can be visited.

Rwanda has three official national languages: Kinyarwanda, English, and French. As a former Belgian colony, French has historically been the language of educated Rwandans. However, over the past several years, in part because of a large Rwandan population returning from Uganda, there has been a major push toward English. In 2008, English was accepted as the official language of instruction for all government schools. As the Rwandan government moves rapidly toward economic and social development, it has targeted information technology and human resource development as its major priorities. English is perceived as

essential for achieving these goals. Rwanda has also begun to move closer to its East African neighbors, joining the East African Community, whose official language is English.

After months of training on teaching, and Rwandan language and culture, Michael and GraceAnne are well into the academic year – one filled with unexpected challenges and frustrations, but also satisfying breakthroughs and achievements. Despite



Michael teaching one of his English classes in the village of Murunda.

the difficulties of teaching English, Michael and GraceAnne have found ways to expand their difference making work beyond the classroom, and into the village of Murunda. Outside of their teaching schedule Michael and GraceAnne have made time for numerous secondary projects, no doubt leveraging Michael's expertise in planning and community engagement.

The school's popular volleyball and basketball courts, made of uneven red dirt and raised bricks marking the lines of the court, would often become unplayable after turning to mud in a rainstorm. Leveraging a grant from the Peace Corps, Michael and his local counterparts helped guide approval of the project through school administration, local government officials and priests, and other decision makers to help improve the well-used but inadequate sports courts. Community commitment to the project donation of many needed materials, as well as a majority of the labor. Thanks to Michael's leadership, Murunda can now host tournaments and games need not end with the fall of rain.

This community development project demonstrated the value of leveraging partnerships and supporting the involvement of the end users in planning, design, and construction of the project. As demonstrated by this project, community ownership can be increased by including local leaders and the general public in the undertaking – from start to finish – which can result in the project being well maintained and leaving a lasting impact on the community.

Michael has also spent time developing a vision plan for the school he works in, adding hand-washing stations, and leading the Community Finance Initiative (CFI) – a financial education program for rural community members. CFI provides lessons to area residents, including female business owners, on savings, budgeting, loans, and personal finance at weekly meetings. The engaged and motivated group has potential to improve



Michael and the community building a sport court that he helped design and secure funds for.

the lives of the participating students, their families, and the community by also teaching others about these essential financial lessons. Through this community development effort, Michael demonstrated the valuable role of public education in the field of planning, and the importance of community engagement in economic development and empowerment.

Michael and GraceAnne also participated in the Grassroots Soccer program through the Peace Corps, which teaches participants about HIV/AIDS and Malaria through soccer skills training. Along with two other counterparts from Murunda, Michael and GraceAnne completed soccer drills to learn more about HIV/AIDS and Malaria and how to better teach students and the community about dealing with these public health challenges. This program also demonstrates the role planners have in improving public health through education, partnerships, and using games and interactive activities as a technique for community engagement.

The lessons learned in the classrooms and studios on the south side of Cal Poly's Dexter Lawn, might feel like a world away for Michael, but he and GraceAnne have demonstrated the value of the skills and experiences gained in the MCRP program during their time in Murunda, Rwanda.

You can follow the inspiring work of Michael (MCRP, 2013) and GraceAnne on their photo-filled blog: <http://moments-away.blogspot.com/>