

Let's Raise Children in Families

PROGRAMME CASE STUDY



Michelle

In 2013, in collaboration with UNICEF, the government of Rwanda established the Tubarerere Mu Muryango (Let's Raise Children in Families - TMM) programme to enable the closure of large-scale residential care institutions for children and promote family-based care. The programme aims to build strong systems of protection and care that will have sustainable and wider benefits for children in Rwanda. This case study profiles the reintegration experiences of one child who has participated in TMM. It is based, where possible, on interviews with the child, his or her family, district social worker and psychologist, community child protection volunteers (known in Rwanda as Inshuti z'Umuryango – IZU – Friends of the Family), neighbours, peers and others. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the anonymity of all concerned.

'Mama, Mama!' shouts Michelle as she enters the house after school. 'Come to greet me; I'm in the living room!' responds her mother, Alice, her voice loud enough to carry down the hall to her daughter. Into the room runs an energetic six year old, with a bright smile and tightly braided hair. 'Mwaramutse, Mama,' (Good afternoon) she says breathlessly as she drops her school bag, bursts into giggles and runs to the kitchen. 'That child,' says Alice with a light-hearted chuckle.

This clean, well-furnished house in a densely populated Kigali neighbourhood, with its yard full of flowering plants and trees, hasn't always been Michelle's home. Her route here began in 2012, when she was abandoned near Alice's gate as a newborn baby. Alice, with her husband, Jean, and their three children, took Michelle in and cared for her for four days, while the local authorities arranged for her to be placed in a children's home. The family enjoyed caring for Michelle and were sad to see her go but, with their youngest child already in his early teens, Alice and Jean felt that they were not in a position

to take in such a tiny infant. With a heavy heart, they said goodbye to her and went back to their daily routines.

Over the ensuing months, the family often thought of Michelle. They even contacted the centre where she lived but were told that visits from strangers were not permitted. One evening, about a year after she'd appeared near their gate, they watched someone from the National Commission for Children interviewed on television, who said that a process was underway to remove all boys and girls in residential centres and to place them in family-based care. The interviewee said that the NCC was looking for people to serve as foster parents to children without traceable family members. This promotion of family-based care was supported by the First Lady of Rwanda, UNICEF and the government of Rwanda as part of the TMM programme. Alice and Jean immediately called the number provided to volunteer to care for Michelle, whose relatives, they knew, had never been identified or located.

Republic of Rwanda



Advancing Child Rights and Protection



The following months involved a series of meetings and assessments with the district social worker and psychologist to determine whether Alice, Jean and their children were willing and able to provide Michelle with a stable, loving home. Once they'd been approved as foster parents, the family began to visit Michelle regularly. Then only 18 months old, with few stable relationships, Michelle initially reacted against these visits by screaming and running away. Over time, with each meeting, she grew pleased to see Alice and the others when they arrived on Saturday afternoons. Finally, when she was about two years old, Michelle moved in with the family.

Settling in

The family had prepared thoroughly for Michelle's arrival – making a small bed, buying children's clothing and carefully choosing some toys. Everyone was excited to have Michelle join them. Everyone, that is, except Michelle, whose behaviour swung between quiet detachment and physical aggression. Sometimes she was clingy and sought attention, at other times she showed no interest in her surroundings. The comfortable relationship that the family had so painstakingly developed on their visits to the children's home rarely surfaced.

Through it all, Alice and Jean responded to Michelle with calm consistency. They picked her up, embraced her, smiled and sang to her as they carried her about the house. No matter how she behaved, they tried to respond in this same, gentle manner. This way of dealing with Michelle's behaviour came naturally to Alice and Jean, and was encouraged by the district social worker and psychologist, whose expertise in child development helped to strengthen the couple's confidence in the approach they had been taking. Over time, as Michelle grew more comfortable and felt more secure, things began to change. She started to call Alice and Jean

'Mama' and 'Papa', to greet others by name and to take on small household chores. As she grew less distressed, her bubbly, happy nature reappeared. When her behaviour regressed or new challenges emerged, her family maintained their consistent approach. During these periods, the district social worker and psychologist telephoned and visited. Each time they interacted with the family, they were impressed by the unfailing love given to Michelle, and the thriving, positive child she was becoming.

Ongoing support

Alice and Jean admit that it wasn't easy in those first few months and years. They relied on those involved in the TMM programme, including the NGO, Hope and Homes for Children, and the Inshuti z'Umuryango (Friends of the Family – IZU) community child protection volunteers, for advice and information. They also occasionally met with other foster parents to discuss their shared challenges during group sessions organized by the district social worker. As Michelle grows older, they anticipate that there will be new struggles as she comes to know her personal history. They say that they don't know how to discuss this with Michelle, and that they will need support once they think she is ready. When that time comes, they are hopeful that she will take comfort in the fact that she is a permanent member of their family: in 2017, the family together decided to formally adopt Michelle. The adoption was approved in mid-2018.

Although to date Alice and Jean have received no financial support, they appreciate the concern and guidance provided by the social worker, psychologist and IZU, who check in with them regularly. They stress that the most important thing a family can provide for a child is love and a willingness to care. Financial assistance would be beneficial, they say, but it is urukundo (heart) that makes the difference.

“The best thing about having Michelle join us is that she has reinvigorated our family and our happiness. Our other children were growing older and we initially thought we had no place for her. But she has given us all a focus for our love and has brought happiness to each one of us.” – Alice.