

## RWANDAN UPDATE

November 2021



Dear Friends,

In general this year was pretty similar to the year before as we continued to live through lockdowns, school closures and other restrictions, as the global pandemic raged on. For this region we had the added joy of earthquakes and volcanos thrown in to keep us on our toes and our minds occupied, but we made it through with much hope for the future. In the summer of this year, Rwanda finally got hold of the vaccines in significant quantity and rapidly started delivering those to the people. They have moved fast and vaccinated many particularly in the Towns and Cities and are rolling the program out further into the rural areas. We still wear masks everywhere and there are some restrictions on large gatherings but slowly things have been opening up. I even saw in the news today that they plan to close the dedicated COVID centres as they only had two patients left, with the majority of case now being asymptomatic or treated at home. This is a wonderful milestone in the country's recovery, and we pray they continue to be successful in the stand against this horrific virus. As I look back on this year, I noticed that although our family life has plodded along nicely, I would have to say for work 2021 was the year we were kicked out of the nest. Honestly, this is not a negative thing, it was certainly not comfortable thing, but it was a necessary thing if we hoped to grow. I am sure everyone has experienced times like this in their lives. We got to a place where everything was working well but if we wanted to step up to the next level, we were going to have to make some tough decisions and, God in his infinite wisdom gave us the shove we needed to move forward and out of the comfort zone.

### **Azizi Life (crafts & tourism) and Beautiful Creations (Bee Keeping and bee related products)**



Right from the start of 2021 we started receiving huge orders from overseas customers (30,000 Trivets, 100,000 candle kits, 7,400 woven bowls and 810 plant pot holders), plus the general sales in North America and Europe continued to grow. We estimated that so far this year we have clocked up more than half a million artisan hours of work. This huge increase pushed the whole team to the limit of their capabilities, it required taking on more artisans (over 800 this year), more staff and finding huge quantities of raw materials. A steep learning curve but one that was joyfully received by all involved. While this was going on in Rwanda the volunteer run warehouse in the US had a big structural change that meant we had to find a new home within just a couple of

weeks. Thankfully, my colleague, Christi, was already on route to the US (for a family holiday and to get vaccinated) when the news hit, which meant she was able to extend her time there and ensure we found and got settle into a new warehouse. Our new home is a proper fulfilment centre and so although more expensive than before, it will enable us to grow much larger. Another "co-incidence" was that we had chosen to introduce barcodes to all our products at the end of 2020 – not because we needed to, in fact, to be honest I am not sure why we had opted to add them. Nevertheless, I thank God we had, because we could not have got into the new warehouse without every product being barcoded and it would have been a nightmare if we had not done before the move.

In Rwanda with all this growth in craft exports we have taken up every room in our current location and so the little guesthouse we had is now filled with boxes and products. This was not a problem for 2021 due to the travel restrictions; however, it did highlight how much we have really outgrown our existing space. For those



of you who have followed our journey, you will know we got a wonderful donation to buy land and build our own place about 3 years ago, but up until recently had not been able to find anywhere to call home. Finally, at the end of the summer this year we got breakthrough. We purchased a perfect plot of land and already have our construction permit. The plans are finalised and work is beginning this month to prepare the ground. If there are any expert civil engineers, builders, plumbers or electricians out there that fancy a visit, just let me know.



Due to a change in operations at the hotel in Kigali, where one of our shops was located we had to move out. This was not unexpected and we had already established a second location in Kigali in preparation for this day, so although sad to leave, not surprised. As is so often the case as one door closed another one opened in its place. For us this time in the prestigious new Gorilla Fund Research and Information Centre. The Gorilla Funds new building (paid for largely by a donation from Ellen Degeneres) is almost complete (opening early

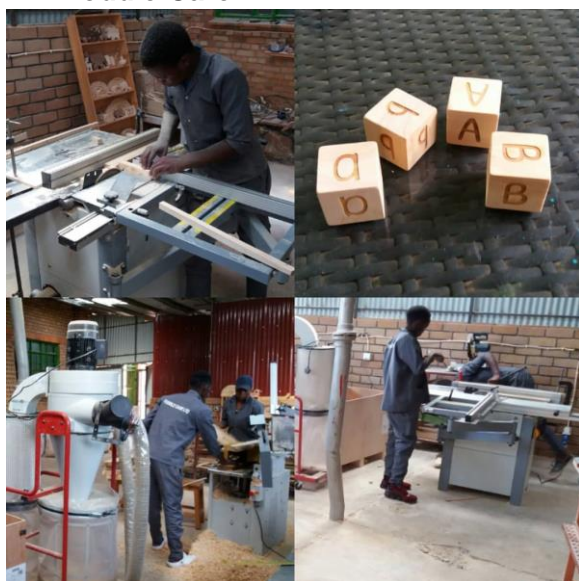
2022) and they asked us to collaborate with them to run the gift shop and experience days from their location. This location is in the North of the Country (right by the Mountain Gorillas) and we are honoured and excited to start working with the communities up in that part of the country.

### Impact Projects

As always I am blown away by the generosity of those that support our work and in particular the impact projects. We just completed a big fund raising campaign for our adult literacy program, which following the opening up of the country, is back to full operations (over 900 people enrolled). During the year we have specifically be raising funds for both the classes and for bibles, to ensure every graduate can get a bible (if they want) as their first book. I am pleased to say that we managed to raise over \$27,000 so far and that will fund our program comfortably for the next year. Praise God!



### Toddle Care



It's fair to say that it has been a tough year for Toddle Care. Every time things seems to be going well the country went back into another lockdown halting all production and sales. Thankfully, things have really turned around since the last full lockdown ended in the summer. Not only do they continue to supply the parents of Rwanda but with the schools opening up again they are once again providing much needed equipment to them too. The team has continued to grow with now 13 staff as well as 5 external artisans who work for them regularly. There is also a great opportunity to supply toys to thousands of schools in Rwanda through a scheme run by a large International Charity. Toddle Care has been going through the tender process for months and will submit the final samples this week. Hopefully, the final samples will be loved and the order placed before the end of the year.

## Family

Our girls continue to grow and love being back at school. They have coped well with the craziness of the last two years. Arts and Crafts continues to be a passion for Keza, whereas Tona seems much more interested in taking things apart to see how they work. It is truly wonderful to see their skills and talents continue to grow and develop. Recently they learnt the Rwandan National anthem, which they sing beautifully. It still amazes me how quickly children learn things via song. I did try to teach them the British National anthem but sadly due to my lack of singing skill and bad memory (pretty much forgot all the words) it sounded pretty terrible.



When Ritah is not working tirelessly on Toddle Care, she is turning our house into a place of tranquillity. Last year we did lots of building work (which she over saw) to fix up our crumbling home and this year she turned her attention to our garden, which is looking amazing. We have a mixture of vegies, fruit trees (already enjoyed our first crop of oranges) and flowers.

After years of battling the inevitable, I finally gave up and visited the eye doctor. Turns out the reason I was getting endless headaches and could no longer read large print children's books was because I needed glasses. Not just for reading but seeing in general and so I have gone from no glasses to full time. I am still trying to get use to them (particularly at night or when wearing with a mask) but I am really enjoying the enhanced vision.



## Prayer Requests

1. Please join us in praising God for all the growth we have seen in the last few years and pray that we are able to continue to build on that. Pray for all the new members of staff and artisans, that they grasp the vision and see the love of God in the work that we do.
2. Please pray for Jeannine (the main Rwandan leader of Azizi Life). She has a serious back issue. She is undergoing physio but if that fails to fix the problem, she may need an operation. On top of this, her eldest daughter is now in hospital with a serious lung issue. They both need completely healing.
3. Please pray that the Azizi Life building work goes smoothly. Particularly pray for safety for the builders, that the plans are followed closely and, that we remain within budget.
4. Please pray Toddle Care is successful with the tender for that large Charity and is chosen to produce the wooden products for all those Rwandan Schools. Also, when they are successful, pray the team is able to keep up with all the new work that is created.
5. Please pray for the Adult Literacy classes. We have recently made some changes to the curriculum to include more prayer and bible study into the lessons. We are also keen to develop a wider discipleship program but are still trying to work out how to introduce something like that. Please pray for wisdom as we try and move that forward.

If you do want any more specific information, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or regular mail (**PO Box 146, Gitarama, Muhanga, Rwanda**). Also remember to visit our Facebook pages ([www.facebook.com/azizilife](http://www.facebook.com/azizilife) and [www.facebook.com/toddlecare](http://www.facebook.com/toddlecare)) to see more photographs and details about what we are doing.

Much Love,  
Tom, Ritah, Keza, Tona and Buster (the Sausage Dog)