

# REBECCA DAVIS DANCE COMPANY

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## ***Jean Bosco Rukirande of Red Cross Rwanda...***

*“The problem in this community is health and water,” Jean Bosco told Rebecca Davis Dance Company as we toured the survivor village of Rugerero in Northern Rwanda in 2009. “Engineers Without Borders has come here every year. They build water systems and latrines for us, but the people think ‘I have water today’, and forget about conserving it for tomorrow. We need to change the mindset of our villagers.”*

*“What about using dance to teach youth about health and water conservation?” I said.*

*The following year, Rebecca Davis Dance Company partnered with Red Cross and Engineers Without Borders to bring two dance instructors (an American & a Rwandan) to Rugerero to run a program for Tutsi and Twa children that combined dance exercises with lessons on community water practices and sanitation.*

*On November 29, 2010, 64 children performed dance, drama and song to demonstrate good and bad water practices. They presented their work before the District Sector Office and the whole community attended.*

*After the performance, Jean Bosco turned to me and said, “Yes – that’s what we needed – dance. This is the first time our children are thinking analytically about how they use water. It’s spreading to their families and throughout the community because it’s fun for them. Now we need to do this in all our villages...so when is your company coming back?”*

## ***Mission Statement***

The mission of The Rebecca Davis Dance Company is to build sustainable projects in post-conflict countries using dance training, performance and education as tools for reconciliation, community building and economic development.

## **Background**

Founded in 2005, The Rebecca Davis Dance Company (RDDC) used dance to bring literary works, significant historical events and modern social issues to the stage. The Company grew quickly over five years, amassing a repertoire of six original full-length contemporary ballets: *Antigone* (2006), *Helen Keller* (2007), *Darfur* (2008), *Greed: The Tale of Enron* (2009), *Van Gogh* (2009), and *Braving the New World* (2010).

At the same time, the organization carried out short-term projects overseas, with Rebecca Davis and company members working as teachers and choreographers to aid the recovery of youth in post-conflict countries. As the need for this type of work increased, RDDC decided to make international projects the primary strategic direction of the organization.

The Company is rolling out a three-year plan (2011 – 2013) to build on its existing overseas projects in three focus countries: Rwanda (Great Lakes Region of Africa), Bosnia-Herzegovina (the Balkans) and Guinea (Mano River Region of West Africa).

These countries were selected for the following reasons:

- The economic growth of each country is stifled by ethnic divisions and the need for national reconciliation and unity
- They share substantial need for innovative, sustainable programs that target youth
- RDDC has existing contacts and project partners in each country

Catering to the core competencies of RDDC, these projects will focus on using dance and choreography as tools of reconciliation with a special focus on youth. Each project is tailored to the specific community, but all work is structured within a pre-defined framework:

- Targets and assembles 100 children (ages 10 – 19 years) of diverse ethnic backgrounds
- Combines dance technique lessons with thematic discussions on one of the following topics: reconciliation, water conservation, and health & sanitation
- Contains a youth leadership/entrepreneurship component that trains the top students enrolled in the program to become teachers' assistants, lead instructors, and eventually in-country administrators of the program

In all three countries, a common set of measurables determines success:

- A positive economic impact on the participating youth and the local partner organization(s)
- A continuous program that operates year-round led by local staff and youth leaders who have graduated from the dance training and entrepreneurship workshops
- A greater community awareness about the social or health issue addressed through dialogue sessions

## **Focus Countries**

Within each country, a specific program has been designed to best serve the needs of the particular community:

### ***Rwanda***

The Rebecca Davis Dance Company is working with key project partners in Rwanda: the National Youth Council, Red Cross Rwanda, and Amizero Dance Kompagnie. RDDC has two ongoing projects: The Water Project (Rugerero, Gisenyi) and the Youth Talent Development Agency (Kigali).

The Water Project is the premiere program run by RDDC. Every year, RDDC works with 60 – 100 children in a survivor village near the border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Tutsi and Twa children participate in daily dance workshops and social dialogue sessions discussing safe water practices, water conservation and basic health. At the conclusion of the program, the children perform a dance-theater choreographic work that portrays good and poor water practices before an adult audience. Thus, the children become community educators.

The Youth Talent Development Agency is a new program underway with RDDC in Kigali. RDDC has been invited to partner with the National Ministry of Youth to create one of five pillar programs at Maison des Jeunes de Kimisagara (MJK) in 2011. This program has a government-designated goal of creating training and employment opportunities in the performing arts for street children of all ethnic backgrounds in Rwanda.

Every November and December, RDDC will bring an American instructor from the USA and employ at least one Rwandan instructor from Amizero in Kigali to lead a 6-week training program at MJK. The program culminates in the presentation of a choreographic production on the theme of reconciliation. MJK and the Ministry of Youth may choose to tour the production throughout the country and the Great Lakes Region following premiere performances that coincide with the winter holidays.

The MJK program includes a “youth leadership workshop” led by RDDC to give the top performing students training in the skills necessary to continue the program after the lead instructors depart. The program will continue year-round on a reduced schedule until the following November when RDDC instructors again visit and teach the program.

### ***Bosnia-Herzegovina***

The RDDC has two projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) that focus on integrating youth of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The first project, *Nas Svijet* (“Our World”), began in 2009 in Brcko. Every summer, RDDC instructors run a series of dance workshops for Croat, Serb and Bosniak youth in coordination with local partner organization *Svitac* (“Firefly”). The workshops follow the typical RDDC model involving dialogue about a pertinent social issue – such as HIV, conflict prevention or human rights - and a public

performance as part of the city's Annual Children's Day Festival. Top students receive additional training in order to continue the workshops after the RDDC instructors depart.

In 2011, RDDC began its second program, *Bridging Mostar Youth*, in the divided city of Mostar. This program was created through a consortia of local organizations brought together by RDDC: RINGO, Nesto Vise, Egipatsko Selo and B – Dance. Together, these organizations provide a multi-disciplinary dance program for underserved children living in the East Side and the West Side of the city. Dialogue sessions focus on social inclusion and education about universal human rights. Nesto Vise provides leadership training to top students to continue the program after RDDC instructors have completed the first six-weeks of workshops. RDDC has hired a local Project Coordinator to oversee and manage the project in the field.

### ***Guinea***

The RDDC works with a local partner operating in Conakry and Kindia: Centre d'Art Acrobatique of Keita Fodeba. The program is designed to foster positive relationships between Peuhl and Malinke children while targeting two pressing problems: education of street children and youth employment opportunities. The RDDC is working to establish a series of technical dance workshops followed by intensive entrepreneurship training courses for the street children attending the Centre d'Art Acrobatique. Some of the students are expected to perfect their craft as acrobats and contortionists and make a living touring abroad. Others, however, will have the opportunity to take additional vocational studies to develop alternative employment paths.

### **Long-Term Vision**

RDDC is actively working to build field offices in each of the three focus countries and hire local staff in an effort to have most of the operations and financial investment take place directly in the field. Organizationally, RDDC is seeking a larger strategic partner to help bring this dance-based model of reconciliation and community education to scale.

### **For More Information**

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