

# CrossCourt

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## RALLYING IN RWANDA

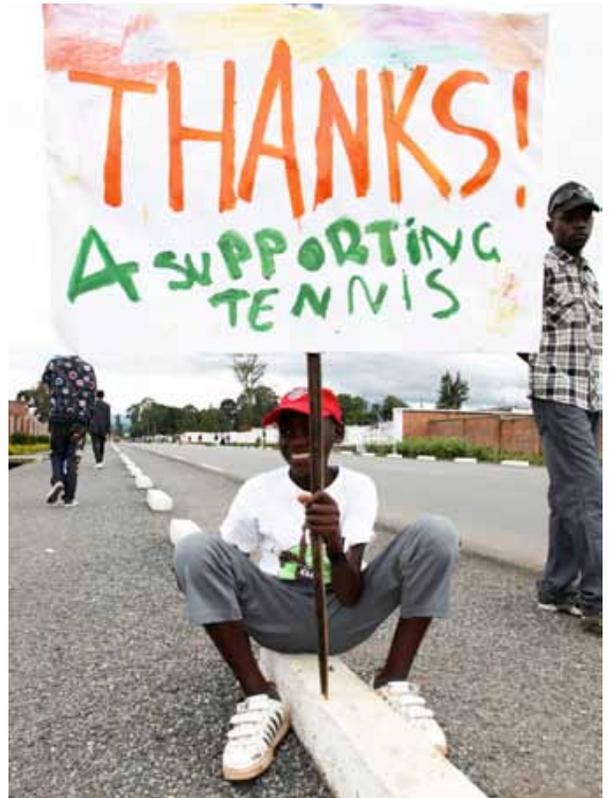
Missouri Valley NJTL in Rwanda benefits from grant

**SUMMER OF TENNIS**  
Pull-out calendar inside!

**TIM KUNKEL**  
Meet the new Volunteer  
Committee Chair



MISSOURI VALLEY



# RALLYING IN RWANDA

by Jackie Lincoln

All photos courtesy of Julie Ghrist

**A**s a child, Julie Ghrist's parents instilled in her the importance of respecting animals and the environment and working hard in creating her own opportunities.

Julie, born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa, comes from a big and active family. Growing up, she enjoyed a childhood full of sports, music, art, and animals. Her parents provided many opportunities for her and her siblings to experience the world.

The tennis court next-door to their home provided an accessible and fun opportunity for Julie to play tennis with family and friends while growing up. Throughout her childhood, Julie continued to play tennis at summer clinics at Wakonda Country Club, during summer camp in Wisconsin and on family vacations (where the Ghrists *always* took their racquets).

"I never felt compelled to be in competitions; I just loved hitting the ball and running around the court. When I was in college at Drake University, I began taking lessons again with Bunny Bruning," she said, "After college, my brother, sister and I lived in Boston. When we got home from work, we'd get our dogs and tennis racquets and race out to the suburbs to play tennis. I have many great memories."

Julie's other interests -- mainly her passion for wildlife conservation -- led her to Africa in 2005 where she volunteered for various conservation and wildlife programs.

"I felt a sense of urgency to be fully immersed in the effort of protecting wild animals and their habitat. My research began by reading and speaking with people involved in conservation and attending lectures. Finally, I set off with my backpack for Africa in the spring of 2005 with pre-arranged volunteer positions."

Julie volunteered in Zambia for Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage, in Kenya for Earthwatch Institute, in Cameroon for the Cameroon Wildlife Aid Fund and in Rwanda for the International Gorilla Conservation Programme.

"After I completed my volunteer positions, I knew I wanted to stay in Africa and continue in conservation. I saw a deficit of a truly up-close, personal, and thorough approach to conservation education. Experts were doing excellent work in the forests, in wild animal vet care, and more, but there wasn't a program with a focus on the future caretakers of the forest and mountain gorillas- the Rwandan children. This is where I saw a need to work with the Rwandan children. This is how I thought I could be most effective."

In 2006, working under the umbrella of the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project, Julie's own organization, Art of Conservation was born. AoC began by offering three-month-long conservation and health education courses for adults and children living in communities near Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. The Art of Conservation project filed for 501(c) 3 status in the United States and applied for INGO certification in Rwanda. In late 2008, AoC began operating as an independent organization with its focus on conservation and health education programs for primary school students.

Art of Conservation's mission is to provide innovative and comprehensive year-long conservation and health education programs for children attending school in rural communities bordering Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. AoC also supports local community initiatives including alternative cooking fuel technology to deter charcoal production and combat deforestation in the mountain gorilla habitat. By establishing and coordinating sports activities, such as the annual 3K Gorilla Fun Run and the Ibirunga Tennis Tournament, AoC provides local community members the opportunity to practice team building and encourage healthy living habits.

While living in Rwanda and running AoC, Julie found it difficult to find solitude in Rwanda- the most densely populated country in Africa. Sports and exercise had always played a role in her life and Julie used physical activity to stay fit and relieve stress. Looking for an escape from her intense work, Julie remembered seeing two beat-up clay courts within walking distance of the house she rented.

"I went to the courts and a tennis instructor showed up and we started hitting. I felt much better getting exercise. Then my neighborhood kids started following me to the courts every time I went."

While her mother and sister were visiting they went to the tennis courts. Julie's mother noticed the little kids hanging outside the fence and invited them to join in and hold a racquet.

"A few days later when my mom, sister, and I were walking home from playing, we saw one child waiting near my home with a homemade tennis racquet made from a stick, a plastic bucket lid for the head of the racket, and some kind of wire for strings. That's when it all started."

Julie's mom and family friend Andy Susanin and former coach Bunny Bruning started donating tennis equipment. Some equipment was shipped to Rwanda. When Julie would travel to Des Moines, she would return with duffle bags full of tennis gear.

On a later trip home, Julie was approached by Bruning and John Terpkosh, USTA Missouri Valley Iowa Tennis Service Representative, who told her about National Junior Tennis and Learning and setting up a Community Tennis Association. Terpkosh offered to register AoC and to seek grant money for her tennis work in Rwanda. Through combined efforts and USTA grants, the AoC-sponsored Children's Tennis Team was established. The program is comprised of 15 young people between ages 6 and 16 who live near AoC's headquarters in Musanze, Rwanda. In 2009, Coach Tony Musengimana came to Musanze to run the courts with AoC managing. Julie reports that things changed dramatically once Tony arrived. He is an excellent role model, coach, and father figure to the children.

Grant money from the USTA has provided court rehabilitation, fencing and compensation for Coach Tony, as well as a USTA banner, tennis racquets, tennis balls, strings, grips, rules of conduct books, pens, tennis ball key chains and a large metal ball holder on wheels. Bruning also continues to donate plenty of equipment, which Ghrist transports back

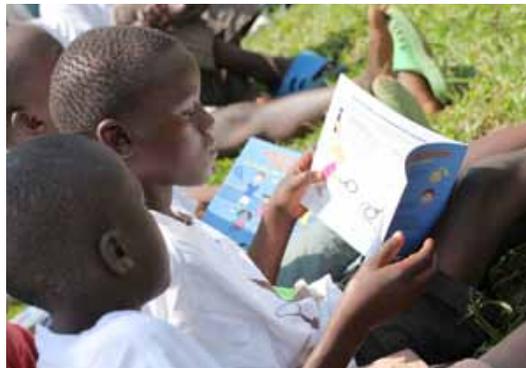
and forth, including high-altitude tennis balls accidentally sent to her, but suitable for play in Rwanda.

In an effort to get the children fitted for tennis shoes, the children outlined their feet on butcher paper and mailed it to Bruning in Iowa who then matched the outlines to shoes that would fit the children appropriately.

**"A few days later when walking home, we saw one child standing near my home with a homemade tennis racquet made from a stick, a plastic bucket lid for the head of the racket, and some kind of wire for strings. That's when it all started."**

The children have learned about the various aspects of tennis and tennis rules as well as learning English through donations of "Let's Play Tennis! A Guide for Parents and Kids" books. The books, written by Patricia Egart, use cartoon illustrations to help parents and children understand the game of tennis. Julie's order of 25 books was matched by an additional 25 books by the USTA. The children, whose first language is Kinyarwanda, bring the books to their tennis clinics and work to improve their English along with their tennis skills.

Over the past few years both AoC and the AoC-sponsored Children's Tennis Team have developed and expanded. Chad Robertson, an LA artist, designed pro bono for AoC a logo for the newly named Ibirunga Tennis & Running Club. Recently Coach Tony, Julie, and the children received the honor of meeting Rwanda's president His Excellency Paul Kagame one evening as he was passing through Musanze Town. Kagame is a tennis player himself and promises to return to play with the kids someday. Toilets and changing rooms are currently being constructed by AoC and the NJTL grant donation.



Julie hopes that from her work with both the AoC and the establishment of the NJTL in Rwanda that children benefit, but not just on the court. "The children are learning etiquette on and off the court, practicing teamwork and proper sportsmanship, gaining strength, and being honest. They are understanding how to win and lose. Competition is part of life; it makes us improve and try harder next time. AoC teaches staying

healthy lessons with the kids so they know the importance of taking care of their mind and body, protecting themselves from early pregnancy and STDs, and feeling confident and proud of themselves."

Julie's efforts, along with the generosity of donors and the USTA, have established an amazing opportunity for youth in the Musanze District of Rwanda. Julie's wish is that when she must move on from Rwanda that the program will stay running and become self-sustainable.

"It would be completely amazing to have a coach come and spend time with Coach Tony and the kids. We could always use more equipment. It is my goal that Coach Tony will build a larger clientele and be self-sustainable. But it is very difficult."

For more information on the AoC and the AoC Children's Tennis Team, or to donate, please visit the AoC website at [www.art-of-conservation.com](http://www.art-of-conservation.com) or the AoC blog at [www.artforgorillas.wildlifedirect.org](http://www.artforgorillas.wildlifedirect.org).

For more information or to order "Let's Play Tennis! A Guide for Parents and Kids" please visit [www.andyacetennis.com](http://www.andyacetennis.com). The book is also available at most retailers including Barnes and Noble and Amazon.