

# Notizie dal Portico



Newsletter from Associazione "Il Portico di San Giuseppe ONLUS"

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The world continues to go through difficult times, and it increasingly seems that the logic of force, war, and selfishness is prevailing. As Christmas approaches, it rekindles in us a hope for peace. A peace that is not found under the Christmas tree, but one that must be sought, built, and carefully nurtured every day, by learning to recognise its signs in our daily lives.

In this issue of the newsletter, we would like to share a few stories of hope: two testimonies from young people who lived at Casa Maia, and a story from the community of Busengo in Rwanda, at the heart of the SPOT project.

These stories are linked by a common thread, made up of a "before" and an "after." A "before" that is often extremely harsh, sometimes beyond our ability to imagine: thirteen-year-old adolescents crossing thousands of kilometres of desert alone, facing violence and danger (let us try to imagine our own children, grandchildren, or siblings in similar circumstances). And an "after" that feels more familiar and reassuring: those same young people, still very young, cultivating habits, aspirations, and dreams no different from those of their peers born here at home.

These are simple stories that show how welcoming someone—and sometimes even just a smile—can help build small fragments of peace. They are two "success stories," observed through snapshots taken only a few years apart. We share them not for promotional purposes—the number of requests for admission to Casa Maia, sadly, continues to grow—but because we believe they speak more clearly than any description of the vision that inspires the house: a true "launch pad," offering the minimum conditions needed by those who, after such complex journeys, must find their own path without the support of a family.

The achievements reached by these young people are the result of their own commitment, yet they would not have been possible without the sense of security and the space to imagine a future that Casa Maia was able to provide. Their stories continue thanks to the trust of those who offered them a job or a home. The ability to listen, to open oneself, and to place trust in people who carry life stories very different from our own—sometimes so different as to feel intimidating—can truly change a life.

The same dynamic is at work in Busengo, Rwanda, where the "before" is marked by many forms of poverty: economic, educational, and food-related. And, perhaps most painful of all, by a poverty of hope. Through the SPOT project (whose progress is described in Esther's account that follows), we seek to support the growth of this small community by strengthening their initiatives to build a more peaceful "after," combating school dropout and promoting women's empowerment.

Because peace is born of equality and justice, the small gestures we share with you are concrete ways of practicing it—made possible by your support.

Thank you for standing close to us and, above all, to Ayoub, Amadou, and Esther.

**Enjoy your reading, and Merry Christmas.**



## Summary

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# News from Casa Maia

Activities at Casa Maia continue. In recent months, several young people have completed their time with us and moved on to more independent and autonomous living arrangements. Finding suitable housing remains the greatest challenge for them, even when they have stable jobs, regular contracts, and sufficient income. Housing is difficult to secure for everyone these days, but for them it is even more so: prejudice, unfortunately, remains deeply rooted.

Over the past few weeks, we have welcomed two new residents, Mohamed and Saikou, who have recently left first-reception centres. To celebrate their arrival and the Christmas season, we organised a shared dinner a few days ago. Sitting together over a pizza or a plate of tagliatelle, cultural distances seem to fade away.

Below, we share the voices of two former residents of Casa Maia: Ayoub and Amadou. We give them the floor—faithfully transcribing their own “interview”—to offer a personal testimony about their lives at Casa Maia and the journeys that led them to us.

Unfortunately, not all stories reach the same positive outcome. Casa Maia also encounters young people who are more fragile and less ready to walk on their own, often carrying even more painful pasts and deep emotional wounds. In many cases, they would need more structured communities, educational or psychological support, or welcoming families; yet such solutions are not always—indeed, almost never—available.

For this reason, Casa Maia and the association strive to remain a point of reference and support even beyond the formal period of hospitality, offering continuity, closeness, and presence to those who need it most.



## In Ayoub's words

My name is Ayoub, and I was born in 2001 in Conakry, Guinea. My family still lives there: my father, my mother, and my siblings. We are seven children from the same mother, although my father has four more children. I am the fourth child, the one in the middle. At home, everyone studied except me. Two of my brothers completed school, while the others are still young. I was not able to study because my father did not have the money to pay school fees. I felt a strong sense of pressure and, at the age of thirteen, I decided to leave home to look for work.

When I left, I did not have a specific destination; I just wanted to find a job. My first stop was Mali, where I stayed for a week. As soon as I arrived, I called my family: they tried to convince me to come back, but I decided to continue and did not contact them again until the end of my journey. I did not have a phone and survived by doing small jobs: carrying goods, helping out on the street. In a day I earned the equivalent of four or five euros. I lived in a camp with many other people. Then I moved on to Algeria and later to Libya, where I continued to get by with occasional jobs, just to have some money in my pocket. I was not yet thinking about Italy. But in Libya everyone talked about it, and so I began to think about Italy too.



Ayoub in Paris





After the match: 3 goals!

Life there was very hard. We lived in the Gargaresh area, and one day the military attacked. I ended up in prison: they take you, beat you, and to get out you have to pay. You also have to pay to get on the boat. My mother had sent money, and I had paid as well, but often the money disappeared. Women suffered more than men: if they wanted to leave, they were often subjected to violence, and their husbands could not protest because they risked their lives.

After three years in Libya, I managed to leave and arrived in Italy, in Lampedusa. I tried only once, and the journey was successful on the first attempt. I was sixteen years old. In the camp there were more than two thousand people, and no money was distributed—only food and clothes. After some time, I was transferred to Turin, to a large facility, where I received fifty euros a month. There was not much to

do; we just waited. Later I was sent to Bologna: first to Budrio, to a centre for minors, in 2019. Then I was moved to Monghidoro, where I stayed for about six months, and from there I returned to Bologna, hosted in various facilities from the age of seventeen to twenty-one. Finally, in October 2021, I arrived at Casa Maia. It was during the Covid period, and I clearly remember the test I took before entering.

In the camps I did not learn much. In Monghidoro I started studying. Then, in Bologna, at the CPIA school, I attended an Italian course and studied to obtain my lower secondary school certificate. I did not manage to get the diploma, but I was able to study: everything I know, I learned in Italy. My first work experience was in a supermarket warehouse. After that I did other jobs, always with very short contracts. For the past couple of years, I have been working in the warehouse of a large food company. Now I have a permanent contract, which has allowed me to look for independent accommodation. I left Casa Maia in January 2024 and moved into a rented room.

I am now in regular contact with my family. Every month I send part of my salary to help them, especially to support my sister with her studies. Expenses here are high, but I send what I can. I am also preparing a surprise: I want to return to Guinea without telling anyone and go visit my grandmother, whom I have not seen for eleven years. I will return only to visit my family. In Guinea it is very difficult to find work, because of poverty and corruption. That is why my life is here.

I felt very good at Casa Maia. It was the first time I truly felt independent. In communities there is always someone who checks on you and makes decisions for you; at Casa Maia, instead, we were responsible for ourselves. For me it was like being at home, even if it is not always easy to get along with everyone.

Now I live in a new place and work a lot. I would like to have a family, children, and buy a house of my own. I do not want to pay rent forever. I do not want my children to go through what I went through; I do not want them to have to leave home at thirteen to work. I want them to study and to be free. I want to stay here in Italy: I feel good here, even if sometimes I meet people who are afraid of me or aggressive, even though I do nothing to scare them.



Together with grandma



A sports injury...

I also used to play football, in the San Donato junior team. I was a striker and scored many goals. Now, with work, I cannot always train, but sometimes I play on Saturdays with friends. When I get home from work, I eat, rest, watch something on Netflix, and take care of the house. I am studying to get my driving licence. When I was living at Casa Maia, I also tried to learn how to cook ragù alla bolognese.

I think a lot about the future. In ten years, I imagine myself with a home, a family, and a peaceful life. I want my life to keep improving, and I want my family to be able to live serenely, without facing all the problems I had to face.

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## In Amadou's words

My name is Amadou. I was born in 2001 in Serrekunda, The Gambia. I lived there, in the area where my family has always lived, until I was fourteen and a half. My father had three wives, and there were eleven of us children in total. My mother, who was much younger, had only two children: me and my sister, who is four years older than I am.

When my father died, there was very little money at home and I had to leave school very early, after third grade, to start working. I was responsible for my mother and my sister. I worked in the fields, or as a labourer or cleaner. But finding work was very difficult: sometimes I worked and was not paid. The situation was really hard. My sister knew some young men who had left for Italy and suggested that I do the same to look for a better future. I was very young, I had always lived with my family, and such a big change scared me. I had no idea what awaited me. Still, after thinking about it, I left together with five or six other people from my town. I was the youngest of all: I was fourteen.



Amadou as a kid, with siblings

The journey was long and full of stages, moving from one country to another by bus: from Gambia to Senegal, then Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and finally Libya. A journey of more than 6,000 kilometres, lasting several months. Each time we arrived in a new city, I had to stop and look for the money needed to continue. A few days after my departure, in Mali, I had to stop to work, while all the other boys I knew from Gambia continued on. I suddenly found myself alone. It was not easy: many people I met told me to go back home, but I had decided to move forward. Money was constantly needed: I was often stopped at checkpoints, and each time I had to pay to be allowed to continue. But going back would have been difficult too.

When I finally arrived in Libya, life became even harder. I tried to cross the sea four times, and every attempt failed. Sometimes we took the wrong route and, after a long detour, ended up again on a Libyan beach. Other times we were stopped by the military and taken back to land: they locked us in large dormitories, sometimes with fifty people, with very little food. From time to time someone would arrive and "buy" some of us: they paid the guards to release us, and we had to work for them until the debt was repaid. I was relatively lucky: I ended up in the home of a family who gave me food and a place to sleep, and when I had repaid my price, they let me go.

On the fifth attempt, we were finally rescued by an Italian military ship and taken to Reggio Calabria. I was sixteen. From there I went to Modena: I went back to school, studied Italian, and passed the lower secondary



school exam. I was doing well in Modena: I had friends and I volunteered. But I was living in a centre for minors, which I had to leave as soon as I turned eighteen.

I was transferred to Bologna, to a small centre in the San Donato district, together with other young men with stories similar to mine. I started with occasional jobs and training courses. When my legal status was regularised (with a passport and residence permit), I also had to leave that facility: my "reception project" was over. But I was not ready. I did not have a stable job or a place to sleep.

On 6 January 2022, I entered Casa Maia. From that moment, a real period of growth began. After a few fixed-term contracts, I completed a training course in logistics at a large mechanical company in the Bologna area. I learned a trade, obtained a forklift licence, and I still work in the same company: first on a temporary contract, now on a permanent one. I became skilled, and today I drive reach trucks, moving very expensive mechanical parts onto the highest shelves in the warehouse. It is a job with responsibility, one that I enjoy and that gives me satisfaction.



At home, with family

During my time at Casa Maia, I also studied and got my driving licence. One day I would like to have a car of my own, but for now I go to work by public transport. I stayed at Casa Maia for just over a year and a half, and during that time my work situation became stable. With a permanent contract and a decent salary, I was able to look for independent housing, though it was not easy. Prices are high, apartments are scarce, and often they are not rented to foreign young people. Sometimes I visited a room, spoke with the owner, and then they never called back. You could tell immediately when someone did not want to rent to you. But not everyone is like that: I also met kind people who listen and speak with respect.

In the end, I found an opportunity and left Casa Maia on 1 August 2023. First I rented a room, then I managed to rent a small studio apartment in the city centre, which I share with my girlfriend. I have both Italian and foreign friends, I go to the gym, sometimes play football, and occasionally use car sharing to go out in the evening or take a short trip.

My time at Casa Maia was fundamental for me: to grow, work, and build a life, you need peace of mind. You cannot learn a job if you do not know where you will sleep at night.

It was also important to return to a simpler and more independent life, after years spent in large communities. After the journey to Italy, with very hard and traumatic moments, I still had many fears: crowds scared me, and I had bad dreams. Slowly, my balance returned. Sometimes I think that if Casa Maia had not existed, I would no longer be in Italy today.

I am happy with what I have achieved, but I feel that my journey is not over. I have other plans: I often tell myself that I am at 60% of the journey and that I still have a lot to build. I think about my family in The Gambia: part of my salary goes to support them. I am trying to start some small activities in my country, build a house, and help my younger sister, who is now sixteen and attends secondary school.

Maybe one day I will return to live in The Gambia, but for now, my place is here.



My job

# News from project

The SPOT project, which aims to support the growth of the community of Busengo in Rwanda, has continued its activities over recent months. In particular, the training centre has completed the education of its first cohort of **16 young women**, who **received their final diplomas** during the parish Mass on 18 May 2025. Below, we share an image of the graduating class and the diploma awarded.



Following this important initial achievement, it is essential to ensure continuity in the activities of the training centre, with particular attention to supporting the trained women as they move toward employment opportunities that can fully value the skills they have acquired. To this end, **the association has purchased an additional five sewing machines**, completing the laboratory equipment and enabling the launch of a new training class.



Between August and September 2025, a project delegation visited the Busengo community on several occasions, meeting with the parish priest, Father François Régis Bagerageza, the assistant parish priest, Father Narcisse Nsababera, and other local representatives. During these meetings, discussions focused on the criteria for allocating scholarships aimed at preventing school dropout. The community expressed a desire to link these scholarships—at least for older students—not only to need but also to academic merit. Based on this shared reflection, **scholarships for the new school year have already been awarded, supporting approximately 80 female and male students.** The SPOT project now needs to continue growing, and this requires stronger management and coordination tools that are more deeply integrated into the daily life of the community. To this end, two important initiatives have been launched.

The first was the deployment to Rwanda, for a period of two months, of **Ms. Esther Uwimbabazi**, a Rwandan national residing in Italy and a graduate in International Business and Development. Her role was to observe the community closely and assess the feasibility of **establishing a women's cooperative to support the training centre** through the commercialisation of tailoring and handicraft products. Her position as a bridge between cultures provided valuable insights for the future development of the project. Her personal account is presented below.



Ms. Domina  
Hakuzimana

The second initiative was the appointment of **Ms. Domina Hakuzimana**, a Rwandan social sciences expert, **as Operations Director**. She will be responsible for coordinating on-the-ground activities, exploring new training strategies, and maintaining ongoing dialogue with the community. We wish her success in her new role and thank her wholeheartedly for her generous availability and commitment.



# In Esther's Words

## Empowering Rural Women in Rwanda: Reflections from My Journey with the SPOT Project

My name is Esther Uwimbabazi. I am a 27-year-old Rwandan woman deeply passionate about empowerment, inclusion, and community-driven development. Growing up with a physical mobility disability profoundly shaped my worldview, teaching me resilience, empathy, and the value of helping others recognize their inner strength. As a child, I dreamed of becoming a fashion designer or beauty aesthetician, inspired by the belief that beauty—both inner and outer—can restore confidence. Over time, this aspiration evolved into a broader commitment to uplifting others, particularly women who often face significant socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

My academic journey took place entirely in Rwanda, where I completed all levels of my education before enrolling at INES Ruhengeri (Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur de Ruhengeri). There, I pursued a Bachelor's degree in Applied Economics with a specialization in Rural Development. My studies exposed me to the realities of rural livelihoods, gender inequality, and the transformative potential of community-based initiatives. These foundations prepared me for an important new chapter in my life.

After graduating, I was granted the opportunity to pursue a Master's degree in International Business and Development at the University of Parma in Italy. This experience brought excitement, curiosity, and a strong sense of responsibility. Studying abroad was not only a personal achievement, but also a commitment to acquire knowledge that I could one day bring back to support my home country. I successfully completed my Master's program on March 17, 2025, after two years marked by academic rigor, cultural exchange, personal growth, and meaningful friendships.

Following my graduation, I was offered an opportunity through the SPOT project to apply both my theoretical and practical skills to a real-world challenge closely aligned with my values: the empowerment of rural women. I was assigned to study the socioeconomic development model of the Busengo training center, developed within the SPOT project. This role, similar to an internship, took place from August 1 to September 30, 2025, and involved local analysis, field interviews, documentation of community progress, and support in drafting final project reports.

This experience proved transformative. In Busengo, I met women of different ages, some young and others the age of my mother, whose energy, solidarity, and determination deeply impressed me. Historically, women in many rural Rwandan communities have had limited access to leadership roles or income-generating opportunities, often feeling isolated or undervalued. Through the Busengo initiative, however, new possibilities began to take shape.

One woman shared a Rwandan proverb that left a lasting impression on me: "When people decide to be together, God comes to be with them." She described her life before joining the group as lonely and stagnant, marked by struggles faced in silence. Today, she prays with others, shares challenges, receives advice, and experiences a renewed sense of purpose. Many women echoed similar stories of emotional healing, personal transformation, and strength found through unity.

As trust developed, the women openly discussed their challenges, which largely centered on income insecurity, household responsibilities, their children's education, and the rising cost of basic needs. Despite these difficulties, the project has begun to generate



Esther  
Uwimbabazi



Esther, Domina and E. Narcisse, with tailoring class

tangible improvements. Several women proudly explained that their children now benefit from scholarships, school materials, and better living conditions, easing financial pressure and restoring hope for the future. The Busengo training center offers a range of skill-building programs, including sewing, tailoring, and traditional handcraft production. Participants learn to create woven baskets, fabric decorations, handbags, clothing, and other Made-in-Rwanda products. With appropriate materials, guidance, and dedicated facilitators, both the first and second cohorts developed strong technical skills, applying creativity, discipline, and teamwork throughout their training.

One particularly inspiring development was the creation of a small savings group among members of the first cohort. Each woman contributes 1,000 RWF (approximately €0.60) per week to a collective fund that supports members during emergencies, reflecting strong social cohesion and mutual support. Nonetheless, challenges remain. The first cohort currently faces limited access to sewing machines, as most equipment is used by the second cohort. Although temporary solutions have been implemented, sustainable long-term arrangements are needed.

From my perspective, the women of Busengo are exceptionally hardworking, motivated, and eager to improve their lives. They are committed to learning and ready to transform their community. What they need now is continued support—through mentorship, additional equipment, better market access, and long-term capacity-building initiatives that will enable them to formalize their activities and reach wider markets. My time in Busengo reinforced my belief in the power of rural development and women's empowerment. It also confirmed the importance of combining theory with practice. This experience was not merely a project, but a journey of learning, connection, and purpose—one that strengthened my resolve to contribute to initiatives that reduce inequalities and foster sustainable development in Rwanda and beyond.



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## A Shared Journey to Rwanda

As some of you may recall, in December 2024 we launched an initiative conceived as an experience of encounter and discovery: a journey to Rwanda to learn more about the country and the community of Busengo. Unfortunately, the worsening crisis in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo made the trip inadvisable, and we reluctantly postponed the project.

The situation now appears to have stabilised, and we are pleased to propose the initiative once again. This journey offers a valuable opportunity to visit a remarkable country, meet local communities, gain a deeper understanding of the beauty and complexity of Rwanda and its people, and experience the SPOT project first-hand, contributing ideas, energy, and enthusiasm.

The trip is planned for the second half of August and will be organised with a flexible structure. Over approximately one week, participants will visit the capital city, Kigali, including the Memorial of the 1994 Genocide; spend one or two days in Busengo; visit the Foyer de la Charité Remera-Ruhondo, a place of deep spirituality set in a striking natural environment; the Mahama refugee camp, home to more than 60,000 refugees; and other humanitarian organisations active in Rwanda.

For those who wish, the journey may be extended in the days before or after with optional excursions to Akagera National Park, Volcanoes National Park, Lake Kivu, and other major attractions.

For logistical reasons, and out of respect for the communities we will visit, participation will be limited. We therefore kindly invite you to express your interest, without obligation, by contacting [associazione@porticosangiuseppe.it](mailto:associazione@porticosangiuseppe.it)

Further details will follow.