

“Singing Burundi’s Coffee Song: George Howell & the Long Miles Coffee Project”

By Erika Koss

George Howell is known as a passionate purveyor of the world’s best coffees and the co-creator of the Cup of Excellence in 1999. But lately, he’s also been curating a series of East Coast events that feature his zeal for education. So far, his special guests have included Raul Perez, Mokhtar Alkhanshali, and Dr. Christopher Hendon. Most recently, George invited Ben Carlson to stop in Boston before the annual Global Specialty Coffee Expo in Seattle.

During his introduction to 60 guests at the Boston Public Market in April 2017, George smiled with pleasure as he recounted the flavor notes from his first taste of Burundi’s “Gitwe Hill” micro-lot coffee: blackberry; sweet orange; yellow grape; honey.

These are the notes that “sing the Burundi song” for George Howell, who also sang the praises of Ben and his wife Kristy Carlson as American coffee pioneers who started the Long Miles Coffee Project (LMCP) in Burundi in 2011.

The Gitwe Hill is one of nine hills; the project itself, Long Miles, is named after another. Each hill also holds a story of a community, one reason why LMCP’s motto—“Coffee, People, Potential”—summarizes what’s possible when people share a vision for better quality coffee and a better quality of life.

Despite Burundi’s rank as the world’s unhappiest country according to the United Nation’s annual “World Happiness Report,” the country resonates with magnificent beauty and resilient people.

Ben felt drawn to both when he first visited in 2010—a trip that fueled his dream of the potential for a different kind of life: that of coffee farmer and producer. Kristy agreed to take on the risks: to sell their home in South Africa and move with their two sons to Burundi; to buy land with the help of donations from friends; and to build a coffee washing station.

In early 2013, the Carlson family took the leap. The end of that year brought their first harvest of coffee, which they managed with 400 families. The word spread quickly that the Long Miles Coffee Project treated farmers with equity and dignity. Now in 2017, Ben and Kristy work with more than 5,000 families (upwards 24,000 people).

Four coffee seasons later, the Carlsons still live near Burundi’s equator, where the sun rises at 6am and sets at 6pm, and where the green hills and temperate weather bestow immeasurable beauty. They’ve welcomed a baby daughter into their family, and Kristy uses her skills as a photographer to share their goal, which, as she said in a recent essay in *Imbibe*, “has always been to explore pathways of hope for farmers through excellently grown and cared for coffees.”

This hope exists, in part, thanks to the two washing stations of the Long Miles Coffee Project: the Bukeye Washing Station in Muramvya and the Heza Washing Station in Kayanza. These serve as two beacons of hope for farmers who walk long miles for many hours to deliver their red, ripe coffee cherries.

Still, most of the challenges remain out of the Carlsons’ control, from fuel shortages to occasional grenades at night. Power exists only a few times a day, water only at night. Despite the 2015 violence that led to the evacuation of most Americans and Europeans, the Carlson family stayed. A recent Instagram post from @longmilesben shared that “In Burundi, there is no hope, no future, no success

without community.” Through partnership with roasters like George Howell Coffee, the Long Miles Coffee Project promises to provide Boston’s coffee drinkers the chance to join Burundi’s coffee song for many years, and miles, to come.

For more information on Ben Carlson and The Long Miles project visit longmilescoffeeproject.com or follow him on Instagram @longmilesben.

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