



Niger Zinder, December 2012

Construction of the Après-demain Education and Development Centre

Since early September 2012, one-hundred or so contractors from two local companies have been building amazingly sturdy concrete houses that will soon be home to street girls and child-mothers attending the Association school!

Construction should be finished by the end of 2012 for two of the three companies, while the third continues on through the end of January 2013. Frame cladding, metal fitting, and brick laying are between 80 – 100% complete! Tasks remaining include coating, electricity and indoor/outdoor painting. I had a lovely time selecting the colours that will go on the indoor walls as well as the “zipline” (reproduction in traditional banko tones), for outdoor walls and the wall surrounding the Centre campus.

I asked that the campus wall be made a few centimetres higher for security purposes and to bring greater privacy to the Centre and its girls within. Small spikes have been inserted vertically into the upper brick to discourage spying and unauthorized visitation.

See for yourselves how our educational Centre has grown!



School Girls

So you're starting to get to know me: I can't seem to turn down any new girls who show up at my door with a widowed mother or grand-mother. One day, I took on my first boys! One week ago, four young boys between the ages of six and seven sat down on a mat directly facing the girls' blackboard. The second day, they were playing pranks in the courtyard with their eighty-five female classmates!

Oumarou, six years, is the little brother of Mariama, who is enrolled in the school and whose mode of transportation is a wheelchair. Mariama receives healthcare because of the generous people in Switzerland, and the entire family is featured in the magnificent and heart-warming documentary film produced by Jean-Philippe Rapp! Oumarou wanted to come to school with his two sisters, Aïchatou and Mariama, so badly; he was bored in his banko hut all alone, with his mother Karima away at sewing class every morning and learning to read, write and figure at the Association sewing room, located beside the girls' school! With Oumarou at school, the family is learning and discovering together.

Little by little as construction is completed, the girls and child-mothers will move over to the Centre roughly two kilometres from the current schoolhouse. More boys will be able to join us for book and vocational studies. Most importantly, we want to teach them to respect girls, and love them. Much like the girls, the boys have lacked greatly in affection and tenderness throughout their young lives, which makes them increasingly insensitive and unfeeling as they grow into men. I suddenly feel as if my entire reason for being in Zinder is crystal clear! It was easy for the girls to figure out that every moment spent at school is a time of sharing, laughter and kindness. Even Aïchatou, the young nanny, joins in and wants a hug from time to time!

Ismaël and Saley in Kindergarten

The best news of last fall was when two young boys, Ismaël and Saley, signed up for kindergarten; these are the two *babies* of the school's two child-mothers! The boys were so excited after their first half day of school. Their mothers take turns riding their bikes back and forth at noon and in the evenings to pick up the boys just one kilometre from the girls' school. They love eating their lunches with mom.

Once children reach the age of four, they can sign up for kindergarten. This entails a small fee for school supplies, which must be paid on the first day. In addition to these two boys, I look forward to signing up Saade's two twins, Batoula's little boy and Fatma Zara's little Kadija. The youngest children, mere months old, will have to grow up first, and by that time perhaps the Association Centre will have its own kindergarten!



The girls during sewing class – boys directly behind...

A new secretary was hired at the end of the summer to help with administrative tasks involving the girls at school and the mothers in sewing class. She studied in Dakar, lives in Zinder and is very dynamic! Another young woman joined our team early this year to support the teachers during knitting and sewing class, and to purchase the ever increasing provisions. There are also eggs to be gathered, animals to be fed, girls to be visited when they are absent or ill, and monthly parent-teacher meetings to organize.

Ramatou, 15 years

The young child-mother so happy to join us last summer with her four month old baby, Biba, has unfortunately dropped out of school. Upon my return in the fall, I learned that Ramatou had been married against her will to a man much older than she is and who already had a wife ... and eight children! Her new husband lives fifty kilometres from Zinder and the day before the ceremony, she and her child were forced to move to his house. It was not long before she returned to Zinder in secret to tell the house mother that she wanted to come back to school; she no longer wanted to live with the man that she hadn't chosen for herself. Sadly, there was nothing I could do to help her; this is the custom in Niger. Young girls inherit a difficult life, and the only thing we can do to help is to support and guide them in their education and training, and to hope that a better world is waiting just around the corner. As it is now, girls become mothers at the early age of fourteen or fifteen.

Goat and Sheep Farming

Our twenty goats love to frolic in their little pen! It's as if they know they'll be moving in the spring to a brand new 8m² fold.

To date, the girls have received thirty-three goats from their Swiss sponsors! The girls all had their pictures taken on Saturday, each with her goat and its kid if one was in tow! They are very proud to be taking care of a goat; it keeps them occupied and gives them an after-school activity and weekend task when they have nothing better to do than pace their 3m² hut and fetch water and wood for their single evening meal.

Mosquitoes, Fleas, Cockroaches and Co.

The Swiss Miracle Doctor with his miraculous Insectivor Biotech just about saved my life in Zinder!

Dust mites, bed bugs, termites, ants, mosquitoes and a host of other little beasts broke camp weeks ago, and I'm thrilled! The minute I shake my can, they creep and scurry away. Good riddance, and see you next season! Not only am I ready for you, I'm quick on the draw!

Life in Zinder

It's quite cooler in Zinder since the October rainy season has come to an end! The days sit at 36° - the nights at a comfortable 18°!

In a few weeks, temps will fall to a minimum of 25° in the day and 12°-13° at night. For those of us who are lucky enough to have a concrete house with a tin roof, a sleeping bag is quite comfortable, but I often think of an entire population less fortunate; those who live out of doors, who sleep with a scant, worn blanket.

Lately, I've been going to sleep and waking up to a strong plastic odour and the smell of old wood pervading the house. Since the houses are not very well insulated (not quite up to European standards!), the sweet scent of traditional cooking mingles with those less agreeable.

Women who build a small fire to keep warm during the “cold” season inhale enormous amounts of toxic metal, since they burn, without exception, anything they find in the street. The smoke is so black and thick that it stings the eyes even from a distance!

A few days ago in the sandy streets of Zinder, it would have been wiser to just stay put at home, meditating the fate of lizards, than go running roguishly about. But that hot Monday morning, I set off to the Tax Office, all smiling and happy, to pay what was due on my local personnel. (Alas, taxes are everywhere, especially where there might be money... humanitarian aid!). The office is on strike (colonization deformation?) for two days. And it was at this precise moment that my beloved Renault Scenic from Switzerland chose to break down – the battery dead. Stay calm no matter what happens! I quickly found five kind guards and policemen to push-start my car. After being “general contractor” on the Association building, I am “bush mechanic”! Once back at the school, I called a mechanic to fix the car properly. He assured me that the battery purchased from *some guy* at the local market does indeed come from Nigeria even though he can’t provide any kind of warranty. Inch’Allah! It will have to do.

And since this is the daily grind here in Niger, the next afternoon my scooter gave out! And we start from zero, easier this time around, with a brand new battery!!

My friends, you who love the street children and child-mothers of Zinder, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the time that you took to read this newsletter, filled as it is with the smiles and laughter of the girls and boys attending our school!

I wish you a lovely winter day, a happy New Year and, most of all, much Love, Peace and Joy in everything you do.

Next Association Event:

Thursday, January 17, 2013

3rd General Assembly

Hôtel de Ville in Romont, 20:00.

There is music
That frees the soul,
As infant smiles
Open the heavens....
Isabelle

Zinder Niger, December 11, 2012
www.aucoeurduniger.ch