



Niger Zinder, December 2015

Promotions at the 'Après-demain' Centre

During my recent annual fall visit to Niger (still 42° in Zinder), a few promotions were given to the local staff! To thank them for their collaboration, their tenacity over the past few years, and to encourage them to keep up the good work, the Association committee decided to promote the young headmaster of the school to director of the centre. A former educator, who's been working at the Association for three years, was promoted to headmaster of the school, and a former educator with four-years' experience was granted the position of matron, overseeing the library. We have a vast library in the refectory provisioned by generous Swiss donors who sent hundreds of books in 2013 via container.

The headmaster will also give remedial courses to students struggling with certain subjects, French classes to sewing students and child-mothers, and will make house calls to sick students or those absent without a note. Balkissa, our future secretary, will also take French classes in order to expand her vocabulary and writing skills to help her draft full, daily reports on Centre activities.

The young scholars are so excited about the beautiful, illustrated books, which open their horizons and knowledge, and allow them to practice their reading. In two years, the headmaster has gone from educator to director of the centre. This spring, with the help of a Swiss volunteer to assist me onsite, we decided to hire a local staff to manage the Centre in order to foster greater safety and a sense of local responsibility.

As of 2016, I can foresee working more frequently from my home base in Switzerland. Thanks to an Internet connection that is more or less reliable depending on the time of the year (sand storms, temperatures over 50°, floods during the rainy season), I can be in contact daily with the headmaster via Skype or email reports. I've been working via Skype for several months now, and things are going very well. Knowing that their founder is always with them, encouraging them to pursue their work and take up the challenges faced by a Centre for orphan children, albino children, and child-mothers, is also an encouragement to our local personnel!

The new nurse we hired on a provisional basis this summer had to be let go. When I arrived in Zinder I discovered some infringements. She would send the sewing students to do personal shopping for her at the market during work hours, and I addressed the issue, giving her a chance to improve her conduct. Unfortunately, she wasn't receptive and walked out half an hour later, leaving 173 children and her colleagues behind. As if it were an everyday affair hiring a new nurse (and secretary) each year, we received resumes in lightning time. We made our selections based on their content and experience, but attendance, dependability, and experience are rare commodities in the region of Zinder.

But we're working on it! This is a case in point of why we're committed to teaching the girls and boys of the Association; we hope that soon they will be able to work at the Centre under a professional contract. They will have learned the ins and outs of how the Centre, and their 'Auntie' Isabelle (the founder), gets things done, that she never tires of putting her hand to the ploughshare!

The best example of this is the young former student, Balkissa, who will begin training as a secretary in the beginning of 2016!

2nd birth at the Centre!

Balkissa, the young former student who was married and then divorced her 60-year-old husband, gave birth to a little girl named Hamida! She was born in October to the delight of everyone at the Centre, especially because of her smiles and night-time tears. Hamida is already a part of our daily lives with so many helpful hands and young mothers to look after her while her real mama gives lessons at kindergarten. While Balkissa waits for her secretarial studies to commence, she teaches the younger children their numbers, letters, singing, and drawing in exchange for a small weekly salary for her excellent assistance!



Amadou, in Children's Paradise

The young Albino boy, Amadou, has finally been freed of his great suffering. Accompanied by the headmaster, by the loyal and devoted nanny, and by the director of social services at the Zinder Hospital, I visited him for the second time at his home in Peulh, 112k from Zinder. Despite our experienced driver, the journey was always the same: as we made our way over unmaintained, pot-holed streets, we held on to anything and everything in the car that was remotely sturdy.

Amadou's father was very relieved to see us, but Amadou was not improving. It had been weeks since he'd stood up. He was too weak. He had chosen to stop eating in order to die faster and escape the pain that stemmed from the tumour on his face. I went in to say hello and offer a few words to warm his heart (and mine); I told him that he wasn't alone in this terrible time. The smell was awful. Rot could be detected for meters surrounding the straw hut. His father asked what he could do to mask the strong smell, but there was no answer but accept it, to live with it in 40° heat!

I found Amadou under his blue mosquito netting with necrotizing, scaly skin, which was completely absent from his right cheek, which should have protected and covered his jaw. Reddish and whitish shreds of cheek opened to expose his teeth all along the jaw. Insects danced around Amadou like the millions of bites over his head and on his face.

On the way back to town, the five of us prayed in silence with all our hearts. We prayed that the new medicine and painkillers would offer some kind of relief.

The next Wednesday (we visited him on Saturday), Amadou's father travelled to a neighbouring village (25 km) to get Internet or phone connection. He informed us that Amadou had joined the other children in Paradise that very night.



In Amadou's village, Peulh, beside his father and the Centre headmaster (left).

Annual Report

The year 2015 saw several local staff members take on new responsibilities at the 'Après-demain' Centre! A new director for the Centre, school headmaster, and matron give the Centre and its 173 orphan children, albinos and child-mothers reason to hope, slowly but surely, in a new future by putting local professionals in positions of responsibility and by respecting their customs and traditions.

Numerous official visits throughout the year, particularly in the second half, opened the eyes of several Ministers of Niger and Zinder in particular to discover our establishment hands-on, which fosters a constructive, disciplined environment in collaboration with the local staff.

The second and final food distribution of the year (rice or corn, onions, salt, and soap) that helps student families was attended by a delegation of Sultan from Zinder. An honour for us, the Sultan is the moral and religious authority, and is extremely respected by the population. He spoke to the parents present and explained how important and necessary it is to allow young girls to study, to refrain from marrying them off too early or pulling them out of school to work at market or in the fields during the rainy season (July-October).

Three local radio and television stations in Zinder covered the official part of the distribution. Images were broadcasted that very evening, as well as numerous times throughout the day on local radio stations. The director of the Centre spoke in the traditional Haoussa language, and I gave a speech in French. The Minister of Education

in Niger sent school supplies to the ‘Après-demain’ Centre to congratulate and encourage us!

Our application for recognition as an educational institution is in progress. We received the first official visit from the Ministry of Vocational Training, who will advise on our case in the capital city. The first phase consists of securing authorization to train secretaries, assistants, and sewing teachers. The second phase seeks to obtain authorization to educate boys in outsourced carpentry, mechanic, and electrical workshops. At this point, the boys are aged between four and nine years, which gives us some time to prepare the project.

2015-2016 brought a good harvest of cowpeas, peanuts, African millet, beans, soya, and sugar cane to Niger! Fortunately, there was enough rainfall between July and October in certain parts of Niger, notably Zinder!

2006-2016: 10 years for Niger!

Next year I’ll celebrate ten years working in Niger, which have been full of concrete projects for the children of Zinder!

The ‘Au Coeur du Niger’ Association was founded in 2009, and continues to be very active and reactive, thanks to committee members and extremely generous donors who believe in these projects and who have brought concrete and direct aid through the education and training of young people in Zinder.

Precocious marriage in Niger

“An excellent film on precocious marriage in Tchintabaraden, in Azawak.”
www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-fbRL2VRE0

Information and numbers

Niger has the highest percentage of child (young girl) marriage in the world.

72 percent before the age of 18

28 percent before the age of 15

48 percent of young girls are mothers before the age of 18

10 percent of young girls are mothers before the age of 15

34 percent of young girls aged 15-19 die during pregnancy or childbirth.



Young seamstresses concentrating on their lessons at the Centre!
November 2015

Occupational hazards to and from Niger...

I am so happy and thankful to have extraordinary people on the committee, those who have my back no matter what!

An example: the technical director drove me to and from the Geneva airport every time I flew to Niger. On each trip I take two suitcases weighing about 30 kilos each, a backpack, and a computer. I tried to take the train at the beginning but with my herniated disc and the operation that ensued, it was better to avoid heavy lifting in order to last a little longer!

Fortunately, I was well taken care of on my most recent trip to Geneva: a three-hour car ride from Lausanne to Geneva airport at seven km/hour, I arrived at the check-in counter too late and, of course, had to catch a flight early the next morning from Paris. The baggage carousel was out of service that morning, and we had to check in manually. I crossed my fingers and toes that my two suitcases would actually make it to Niger!

When I'd finally arrived in the capital, 1,000 km still separated me from the children in Zinder. A humanitarian airplane is scheduled about every three days, and on this Sunday morning a sandstorm coupled with a technical issue caused a three-hour delay. We nearly had to stay an extra day!

More often than not, fuel shortages or dirty fuel keep airplanes on the ground in the capital, as happened twice this summer!

My most recent return to Switzerland caused yet another gripping scenario from the hands of the Universe (and, above all, Man!). Following the attack and hostages taken in a hotel in Mali, Air France cancelled all flights to Niger. And mine was one of them! With the valuable help of Romontours, I was able to secure a flight with Turkish Airlines at 2 o'clock in the morning on Tuesday... arriving in Turkey Tuesday morning, just as a Russian airplane was being shot down by Turkish authorities. Turbulence over Istanbul made the situation worse. After hours of delay, I was finally able to admire the breathtaking snowy summits of Grisons and Valais! Eighteen hours of travel in three different airplanes and airports, there's no doubt I wrapped up a year at the school of patience and acceptance in style!

Events

- Friday, December 4:** Booth at Marché des Artisans, Romont, Castle courtyard
5pm – 9pm
- Saturday, December 5:** Booth at Marché des Artisans, Romont, castle courtyard
1pm – 9pm
- Saturday, December 5:** Booth at Christmas Market, Semsales, multifunctional hall
11am – 6pm
- Sunday, December 6:** Booth at Christmas Market, Semsales, multifunctional hall
10am – 5pm

As of Saturday, September 5, 2015, **ESSENTIEL Boutique at Grand-Rue 11 in Moudon**, run by Jessica Perrin, proposes a range of homemade and food items prepared by the girls at the Association, and by the Tuareg people of Niger: chilli powder, peanut powder (like Maggi but all natural!), peanut butter, heart-shaped soap, silver rings, bracelets, and various necklaces, leather or metal heart-shaped or African continent-shaped key rings, handmade greeting cards in fabric, jewellery or storage boxes in goat leather. All in addition to a line of precious, essential homemade products!

THANK YOU for having taken the time to read about my latest adventures in Niger!
THANK YOU for your invaluable support from far or near!

Wherever you may be, I wish you all a wonderful holiday season!

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Isabelle Macheret

Zinder Niger, December 2015