

ASSOCIATION



Niger Zinder, May 2014

### Association girls make soap!



The biggest girls, child-mothers and young wives (15 – 17 years) have started making heart-shaped or round soap, scrub or liquid soap in the sewing room. They love to make and sell their goods for a cut of the profit! They reinvest their earnings into the purchase of more supplies to produce more soap. A nice little business is budding in Zinder!

A local teacher, who lost a leg three years ago due to infection, now spends three afternoons a week helping the girls with their business.

The girls and the teacher each receive a salary on Friday, which allows them to live autonomously and with dignity! It also helps the girls to resist being tempted by solicitation by men in the streets of Zinder. Now they can buy shoes, clothes, soap, food and supplies for their goat, while helping those around them, proudly and without worry.

Fatouma Zara, child-mother with two small children, is a wonderful example of this. She learned French quickly at school and for the past two weeks has been helping a teacher with the boys every morning, joining the girls for soap making in the afternoons. They also sew clothes and hand towels to sell. This provides her with a nice little salary! I hope that in the next few years we will be able to obtain recognition for the Association as an educational institution for young women.

To date, we have 27 locals working at the Association, between the Centre, the boys' school and the sewing and soap business. Some 20 young women earn a small salary for their work in the soap and sewing business.

Some of the girls that used to attend the school but were married (sometimes as second wives) and prohibited from attending school by their husbands, heard tell of "Isabelle's work that will earn them a salary"! One after the next, they have returned to visit the sewing room and observe how it's done. The sewing teacher talks to them and offers advice. Often, we have to visit their husbands to ask permission and reassure them about the benefits of their young wives holding a job. The fact that these girls brings home a little money often pleases the husbands, who either don't have a lot of work themselves or who have a small business at the local market. These young women can come to work or simply to enjoy the company of other women their age! Often, a new-born comes strapped to a mother's back.

The girls that are discouraged by school work, and who find it too difficult to follow the curriculum, are given the possibility to join the child-mothers and married women in the sewing room. To be honest, they are often urged by those at home to bring in some cash at the end of each week, which is a real help to their arduous existence, wrought with illness, death and all manner of trial.

There are those mothers or godmothers that forbid their daughters from being educated since they feel it doesn't bring any money. I was forced to address this within the Centre if I didn't want all the big girls to be married off for a dowry, or withdrawn from school to go sell vegetables and wood in the sandy streets of Zinder, or be tempted by certain men.

Once when a girl was absent for three to four days, one of our educators visited her home to explain to her family why she should continue her studies at least until the age of 18. For the past month, I've been giving a small allowance to the girls – the oldest ones – for their help in the kitchen (meal distribution, dishes) and for housecleaning tasks. It seems to be working, since for the past month we've had zero absences from school!

Slow and steady wins the race!



We recently received five computers from a generous company in Lausanne! Thanks to our dear honorary president, the girls have had the opportunity to learn to use technology with the help and patience of an IT professor in Zinder.

Binta, who enrolled at St. Joseph's College in the fall of 2013, also takes IT classes at the Centre. She wants to be a nurse and work in the Centre infirmary after completing her studies.

If the *Au Coeur du Niger* Association is officially recognized as an educational institution by the Federal Ministry of Education, future secretaries, accountants and administrators will be qualified to enter the work place or become the future leaders of the *Après-demain* Centre and school for boys! Inch'Allah, all will be well!

The Association has prepared 12 girls for college entrance exams next month, hopefully to enter college this fall. Some dream of becoming teachers, other nurses, and Zeitouna says she wants to be a 'founder'!



### **New art on the wall in the teacher's lounge at the Centre**

Once a week I stay at the *Après-demain* Centre late into the evening for a sleepover. Everyone comes - boys and girls, big and small – for a time of play and fun. It's a really wonderful time to reclaim a bit of my inner child, a time when everything seems possible and the world is sweet and fair!

Unending games of hide and seek stir the dust in our 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> courtyard. Imagine if you will some 80 children (out of 138) running around in every direction to find 'Aunt Isabelle' hidden among the buildings! I may know every single square inch of this Centre but the children are much more clever than I am and they find me every time!

They know how to turn ordinary moments into extraordinary ones.

### **Day to day in Zinder**

With the dry and scorching season upon us, the population is in full submission to its environment. Sand is in the air, which is difficult to breathe. Throats dry within minutes. 46° to 50°C during the day, the temperature hovers around 34° at night, with recurring power outages and a limited supply of drinking water that fails to meet the needs of a growing population around Zinder.

Could the heat be responsible for the machete fight that broke out between students of the secondary school and the university, just 200-metres from my house in Zinder? It didn't end well. A young man was taken to the emergency room for serious injuries, and the military was called in to bring order. The next day everything had returned to normal.

A few days later I was surprised when a rock was thrown at my car as I drove toward the Centre, though I was minding my own business. Since I'm of a curious nature and I don't really like rocks being thrown at me, I stopped and turned around to ask the man why he did it. Well, yes, I'm somewhat of a risk-taker...

In a blend of French and Hausa, the man accused me of having broken a wooden box he uses to sell goods along the side of the road. He wasn't there when a vehicle drove into the box, but witness reported having seen a white car. Note to the reader: there are only white cars in Zinder!! I drove away as he threw two more stones at the wheels. A man gestured to me not to return, but since I have a dislike for injustice, I did another U-turn and stopped 100-metres farther down the road at the military base, where they were all watching this little incident play out without doing a thing about it. I forced them to get up and do something, to please calm down this caster of stones! For Pete's sake!

### **Association Events:**

#### **Friday – Saturday, May 30 - 31, 2014. 11:00 – 22:00 – Romont Fair**

The Association is present at booth no 47-48, BCF and Radio Fribourg. You will find heart-shaped soaps, hand-made by the girls at the Centre! Isabelle is present.

#### **Saturday, June 7, 2014. 10:00 – 16:00 – Fribourg Centre**

Ethics, Responsibility and Development Day. Organised by Ms Vivianne Châtel, Director of the Master's degree and students at the University of Fribourg.

Booth with presentation of *Au Coeur du Niger* Association activities and projects. Isabelle is present.

#### **Monday, June 30 and Tuesday, July 1, 2014 – VTT Race Moutier-Romont**

Organized by a class of precision mechanics at the Professional School in Moutier and their professor, Jacques Stämpfli.

1<sup>st</sup> Day: Moutier-Marin NE

2<sup>nd</sup> Day Marin NE- Romont, with finish line at Romont Castle around 17:00.

Aperitif provided.

Isabelle rides from Marin NE to Romont! Thanks for coming out and encouraging us at the finish line!

Thank you for having taken the time to read this newsletter, and for travelling with me and the children in our sandy, sun-filled corner of Niger!

The girls and boys of the Association school wish you happy days full of fun and sweetness!

Personally, I send my warmest greetings from a sticky, 50° landscape, as faithful to the heat as the sand of the Sahel.

Isabelle Macheret  
Zinder Niger, May 2014

[www.aucoeurduniger.ch](http://www.aucoeurduniger.ch)