



Zinder, Niger, March 2013

WELCOME TO THE APRES-DEMAIN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE!



Isabelle and Sahara in front of the Après-demain Education and Development Centre.
In the background, guards have been positioned to ensure a security perimeter around the buildings.

Building is nearly complete and I enjoy stopping by two to three times a day to see the final touches being applied and oversee alterations, sometimes asking them to undo and then redo things that simply don't correspond to the original plans! I learned early on through experience and terrain restrictions that you can't just follow your original plans – that the way we think, or other people think, is not the way they think here in Zinder. I bring my own thoughts and plans with me, and the contractors and labourers are not necessarily thinking the same things I am! So I often walk over to the Centre to supervise this or that, ask for an extra wall here, straighten a lamp there, add a little window in the guard tower, redo a slope that was calculated too steep for Mariama's wheelchair to access easily, not to mention all the people who need to pass there without risk of falling; the day to day. I ask for a fence to be changed that has been installed with a lick and a promise, and stand up to the foreman even

though I'm but a young woman asking firmly (but kindly) to start over or ... please *begin* a project. And then I decide at the last minute where to build a room for the nanny and the babies (check! whew!). Our latest challenge is to hire qualified staff members to help raise the education bar. Since I can't be everywhere at once, and given that I lack the necessary skills, I was so glad when I came into contact with a young Swedish girl named Esther who has been living in Zinder for twenty-five years. I met her by chance (there is no such thing as chance – there are only appointments)! I had heard she lived somewhere in the vicinity but had never had the opportunity to meet her or her family. Esther quickly became involved in my project and the challenge that faces our Centre, which is soon to house more than ninety girls, aged 5-18! Every bit as adorable and sweet, the eleven boys aged 5 -9 will remain at the current school house while they wait for their own Centre to be built on the property donated by Zinder township just one kilometre from the girls' school as the crow flies.

Esther works at the Association as a school counsellor for both staff and students. I really appreciate her fantastic work with these children, and she brings with her a very unique activity for them, with seven horses on her own property. For the past three weeks, the girls and boys have had an opportunity to go horseback riding every Monday and Tuesday from 4 – 5 o'clock! For starters, we've been riding around the school house but once we're moved into the Centre there will be more space to ride and a gate that leads out into the bush surrounding Zinder for greater freedom and long walks! This is a great way for the girls to learn to be more independent and in time, to grow in self-confidence.

I admit that I have really been enjoying the magnificent beasts, taking time for long rides in the wilderness late Sunday afternoons with Esther. It frees my mind and affords me a chance to reconnect with an animal that I love.



The girls are so excited to discover their future Centre, the place where they'll live, learn and grow! One Friday morning in March we had our first visit. A minibus was rented for the occasion to transport the entire school to visit the Centre we've been dreaming of for one-hundred nights! Imagine the swarm of excited children out on the sandy playground – it was worse than during construction! You couldn't see anything through the cloud of sand stinging your eyes!

The girls rushed to see the six big classrooms that make up the two buildings. They walked through the two cafeterias and admired the metal lockers that will store the effects of those sleeping in the two dormitories. With their own mat and a mattress, they'll be quite comfortable! More comfortable than at home where many of them sleep directly on the floor, squished one up against the other.

They discovered the playground and basketball court where they'll spend hours playing! Two hoops are planned: one for the big girls and one farther on for the little girls, providing enough space for everyone to show off her athletic skills!

Beyond that is a large goat pen big enough to house some fifty ruminants and a chicken coop hotel ready to open its doors to the great laying ladies! Wood bars have been set across to protect them during the night and a wall provides an intimate environment in which to provide eggs. Farther on still, the girls came upon the vegetable garden! Soon they will be raising their own produce.

Clear water (with an excess of nitrates) is available at the water pump, built in 2011. Extracting the precious-as-gold liquid in Niger is quite the achievement! I had ordered a manual pump in Nigeria as a stand-in until we could get connected to Zinder's water service, and what a good decision that turned out to be! It took three months of calls and visits to the city utilities office to get the Centre hooked up to Zinder water!

One more anecdote that consumes my time, energy and patience; I like having things done well and on time, which has made me ultra tenacious and demanding. I want to say a word for Gruyère Energie in Bulle, whose safety manager was swift to send me an electric water pump via DHL two weeks ago!

Everything was unfolding perfectly. We had a manual pump that worked and would soon be in possession of an electric one, to be installed using the PE32 pipes purchased in Maradi, 350 km from Zinder, on Saturday. I hadn't taken into account the fact that the universe enjoys testing the limits of all that is feasible. The electric pump arrived at Niamey airport customs two weeks ago, and since then I've been receiving requests for papers that don't exist – papers without which they won't release the package. I have no idea how I am going to procure the document they want so we can have our pump at our Centre in Zinder. I guess I'll think about it for a few more days, and then may just have to travel to Niamey airport myself.

And since there are situations even more tangled and *African* in nature than that ... I recently sent a package to Switzerland via DHL, and it got stuck at the Niamey airport. After only a few days wait and a pushy call on my part, the package has been freed for travel!! Professionals in Switzerland are helping me with a botanic experiment, and they need several kilos of a plant native to Zinder to finalize texts and obtain a scientific result. I had taken great care in preparing an enormous box full of everything they could possibly need to send by plane, the great difficulty in Zinder being to find a big box! And then being able to locate packing tape ... that actually sticks! It took the guard and me quite a long time to get it ready, starting over twice, and with the temperature rising to 50°, everything unsticks, warps, and shrivels even after wrapping the brown packing tape around the box three times! In the end we produced a beautiful, beribboned Christmas package. The next day, after having dispatched my masterpiece to the capital via bus, addressed to the DHL office, was I informed that my box would be opened twice for administrative purposes and sanitary examination. Something tells me they won't be putting as much determination into repacking it as I did into preparing it – and I wonder if it will actually make it to Switzerland. In the end, the most important thing is avoid getting arrested for stealing suspicious plants or who knows what they might event!

At any rate, I'm in the clear now that this is published and I have plenty of witnesses worldwide. Hurray! Another challenge that faces us day after day, year after year, toward ensuring the smooth running of the Association is keeping all official documents and permits up to date! And since we have to renew certain permits in order to function in Niger on an annual or biennial basis, I spend a lot of time doing paperwork. One week ago I sent an Association teacher to Niamey to obtain a work permit renewal. Upon their recommendation, I submitted everything back in December 2012, but it's never early

enough. The teacher informed me today that she will have to go back in ten days to retrieve the authorization that has yet to go through Ministry after Ministry. Inch'Allah! And since I couldn't possibly spend weeks in Niamey, I have tried to conscript some willing soul to help me, and I'm always open to a Plan B!



The manual water pump labours on as we wait for the electric pump stuck in Niamey...

Life at school

Since February 2013, a group of three griots have been coming every Wednesday afternoon to entertain the school girls and boys! Griots are men who tell stories, play traditional music and get people singing and dancing! The local custom is beloved, and I wanted the girls and staff to enjoy it on Wednesday afternoons when we normally enjoy some time off. But it wasn't all easy sailing; some moms just don't want their daughters dancing before these men while others were unable to participate, having to go home to work, sell things at market or attend Koran school. We met with the parents and it was decided that the girls who had to go home after Wednesday morning classes would leave at midday; the others will enjoy a fabulous meal, meat included, and wait for the griots to come from one to three in the afternoon! There's going to be a lot of sand flying and fun for all when the griots play their tunes!

We held competitions for the best and most original dancer, the most willing and the most persevering (it takes a lot to wear them out! They've been so full of energy since they've been cared for and are eating well at school!)

To date, the school has three classes, one with fifty-one girls and boys to two teachers, a second class of nineteen girls, and a third of twenty-five. Six child-mothers take sewing and knitting lessons with three local teachers.

Every morning twenty-three mothers attend classes of sewing, knitting, embroidery, macramé, as well as French, math and health in the sewing room with three teachers.

The Association has hired twenty-two local staff members, from a guardian to teachers! These include our nanny, cook, teachers, educators, secretaries, counsellors and the goat herder).

Zakia, 7 years, taken from her mother by an uncle...

One February morning after three days of unexcused absence, I asked an educator to pay a visit to Zakia's mother to inquire as to why she hadn't been to school. When she returned from the small, traditional banko hut that houses several people, the educator announced that Zakia's uncle had taken her with him to Nigeria to leave her with people in a small bush village. Had he sold her? Was it to teach her a lesson? The uncle had accused Zakia's mother of having enrolled her in a school that "evangelizes" children. This mom had already lived through having her four other children, all boys, taken from her by her husband when he remarried in a bush village some 150 km from Zinder several years earlier. Profoundly upset and unable to eat for days, she found the courage to come and tell us of her pain in having lost her only remaining child. She quickly suggested that one of her brothers leave for Nigeria to find her daughter and confront the uncle, in the hopes of convincing him to bring the child home. After so many tears and prayers, this courageous mother saw her prayers answered three days later! Zakia was returned to her little straw and banko hut! The next day she returned to school, shy and still under the shock of what had happened to her. A big hug from the director and a long debriefing with the educator, and everything was set to rights. Children are gifted with so much potential for resilience!

Life in Zinder

Ali, my home guard in Zinder, gave me quite a scare on two occasions this year. This time it was a Tuesday morning at 6:30 am when a knock was heard on my glass, barred door – furtively, softly. His wife stood before me with despair and tears in her eyes: Ali was very sick, lying in the small guard shelter in front of the house. A nurse was already at his side administering intravenous therapy in an attempt to rehydrate him. He had suffered from diarrhoea the day before without telling anyone, assuming that everything would be just fine, as he always does. Failing to rise for prayer at five o'clock, his wife grew worried and came to see what had happened. She immediately fetched the nurse, who is used to coming twice a year to care for Ali! After three solid days of much-needed rest, water and vitamins, Ali was doing much better – even able to stand on his skinny legs. Ali is in desperate need of his job to maintain his family in good health. Five out of nine children are in school, the youngest being four years old, and all of them need to be fed. And he's not getting any younger...

It is positively broiling in Zinder. Even the tiny lizards flick their tongues out and drop dead suddenly of a morning in the corner of someone's room. And how badly a dead lizard can smell! Their little bodies are quick to decompose in 40°-50° temps, and you have to scrub for days to get all the miniscule lizard skin remains off the floor! One reason why you never want to forget that the critters are everywhere and roaming free!



At the Association school house with Esther's horses - they make the children so happy!
March 2013

Thank you for taking the time to read our newsletter! Thank you for your interest, for your words of encouragement that warm my heart, for all the little things you do for the street children and child-mothers in Zinder!

I send thoughts of friendship to you – thoughts that burn with the 50° intensity of Zinder, with the constancy of the Sahel desert sand.

Isabelle

Zinder Niger, March 17, 2013
www.aucoeurduniger.ch

*Stretch out your hand,
Build a future with Après-demain.*