



Niger Zinder, October 9, 2013

EQUIPPING THE *APRES-DEMAIN* EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE



Girls and child-mothers at the *Au Coeur du Niger* Association School moved into the new centre on Monday, September 30, 2013, and can finally enjoy a clean, spacious environment!

Over dunes and through many sands, I did it! And these walls are built with my tears, with all my strength!, through a long the battle!

My return to Zinder this August was so full and busy, what with my car breaking down, the printer out of service (a whole lot of no fun out in the middle of the Sahel), my email address suddenly

erased (many thanks to the online service that was able to reconnect me), young girls having wed during the summer vacation (14 and 16 years) and a technical audit that set to rights a handful of construction errors that, fortunately, were fixed over the past weeks!

The mayor of Zinder and his very professional team offered technical and administrative support that helped us move safely – not to mention joyfully - into the Centre.



One of the six Centre schoolrooms!

The ninety-six girls enjoying the generous support of their sponsors, and reaping the benefits of donations from Switzerland and beyond, finally have a beautiful space to work and study in optimal conditions. Three educators and three local teachers ensure daily that the girls receive an education and supervision from 7:30 am – 5:15 pm! A nurse, nanny and secretary take turns during the night. Each has a room in which to sleep and supervise the girls and the children of the child-mothers. I sleep quite well knowing that everyone is safe under the watchful protection of the guards outside the Centre!

The sixteen 5-9 year old boys reside at the schoolhouse that I rent one kilometer away, with two educators and a visiting nurse to care for them.

The child-mothers and mothers of school children pursue their training in sewing, knitting, embroidery and macramé in the sewing room adjacent to the boys' schoolhouse.

My next goal is to train both child-mothers and the older schoolgirls to be secretaries or monitors for the Association! They already help the littler girls with their homework and games, and contribute to maintaining discipline within the Centre. I would love it if they could take higher-level courses in French, information technology (an IT room was planned for the Centre), after which the Centre secretary could take them into her care and begin their professional training. A small salary on the horizon has them quite motivated already!

One of our objectives was met in September when three out of four students passed their entrance exams to the college in Zinder! Binta, whose mother is in a wheelchair due to illness as an infant, obtained the 6th best result out of forty-eight students, and entered the College on October 7th. And since nothing seems to be easy for these girls, two others also passed but were unable to enroll when one was informed that she would be married the following year, and the other simply never returned to school.



With the child-mothers' children in their new room at the Centre!

Aïchatou has gone from being a nanny to being a preschool teacher! They have a fantastic time together drawing and learning the French alphabet, with giggles all around.

Huge animal murals are being painted on the walls, during which time the children enjoy the swing set or play ball on the playground. Very soon now, every child will have an orange-red uniform to wear!

Our container arrived in June, and with it wonderful presents for all the children and personnel! Beautiful desks, comfortable tables and chairs were the delight of every student and adult; they will be useful for many years! Thanks to the Order of Malta in Fribourg and the School Circle in Siviriez for having made all this possible in Niger!



The Centre vegetable garden growing well and coming to life!

Due to the water pump built in 2011, the girls, boys and local personnel have been enjoying fresh vegetables for the past month. I am also having my delicious daily ratatouille!

In order to ensure a bountiful harvest and to care for our vegetables and fruit trees, I hired Moussa the park ranger who works with Zinder's Water and Forest Service. It's true that there are no forests in Niger, but the Minister has given this name nonetheless. Bureaucracy here is baffling...

If you look closely at the picture above, you will see a few lingering goat droppings around the vegetable plants. I have been careful to maintain a wholly organic garden, completely devoid of chemical fertilizer. We use the manure from fifty-five goats to nourish the vegetables that feed us so well, with a warm sun that ensures growth (as well as rapid drying out and zero moisture, of course!).

Despite the fact that the rainy season has passed, temperatures in Zinder hover near the 40s. The first harbingers of winter are seen in the sky, with the arrival of sand haze and dust in the air.

The post-rain climate has also left us with flying, gesticulating memories! From one day to the next, thousands of maggots, caterpillars, works, earwigs and locusts have invaded the entire region. Everything has grown so calm at my place! For my 4th year in Zinder, I am given the song of crickets starting at 5 am! And it continues down into the sink drain. Oh, were that Mike from Desperate Housewives lived nearby! It would be so convenient to have a plumber!



The girls now take their meals in two large refectories!

New to the Center this year, the girls are served in plates, eat with a spoon and drink from a cup that bears their own names. Before this, everyone ate with their hand from a single platter served on the

floor, both at school and home. Eating this way comes with the risk of contracting unpleasant illnesses.

Breakfast is served at 7 am for the girls who are permitted to sleep at the Centre from Monday to Friday, and I wanted to spoil them a little to encourage their stay at the Centre during the week: they receive bread, milk (from our goats) and honey to start their day! At 10 am, our two cooks prepare porridge made with the milk from our goats. At noon, a warm, traditional meal gives them the energy they need to swing, play basketball, run around the garden and play “Simon Says”, and do puzzles while they wait for classes to resume at 2 pm. The 5-8 year olds –the littlest girls - take a nap under their mosquito nettings. At 5:15 pm, cookies and fruit are served, depending on what has come from Benin, Togo or Nigeria, to those who are staying the night, while they wait for their meal at 6:30 pm. Girls whose mothers, fathers or uncles do not let them stay the night either take the bus home or walk, as they are used to doing, only to return to school the next day.

With time, it is my hope that all the girls will be able to stay at the Centre from Monday to Friday.



Playground and Basketball Court

Big and small play nicely together during recreation and activities time. Each educator is responsible for his or her class throughout the day, including recess. Tireless, the girls laugh, holler and run about in intense heat! Barefoot in burning sand, they feel no pain as their joy explodes in this new life!



The day wanes and for the girls sleeping at the Centre, it's time to do laundry and get ready for bed.

They take off their uniforms and don their house clothes. Some hurry to wash their clothes, enjoying the sweet smell of Marseille soap and running water. Others begin their homework for the next day or try to work the puzzles that arrived in the container last summer.



One of the two Centre dormitories!

After having completed their homework, washed for bed and eaten their dinners, it is time to sleep. The 'Little Prince' watches over them as they snuggle down to sleep at 9 pm.

Mats, mattresses, light sheets and mosquito netting allow the children to sleep sweetly in preparation for their next day at the Centre.

All materials for the dormitories were generously donated by various companies in Fribourg and Lausanne, and were received in Niger this summer via containers. A class in Canada also held a drive to collect funds and materials, which were sent directly to Zinder in seven packages! Young people and educators of the CO Pérolles in Fribourg created dozens of beautiful Totems that were sold this summer on campus.

And to everyone else, near or far, who have either participated or continue to participate in this wonderful experience for the children in Niger, we say THANK YOU from our small corner of the Sahel!



To thank and encourage the families of the girls and boys at the Association school, a 3rd food distribution was organized this year at the new Centre! It was an opportunity for everyone to visit the school so they can see for themselves how beneficial it is to allow their daughters to study and sleep at the Centre throughout the week. A representative of Zinder's mayor gave a speech in his native tongue, *'baoussa'*, which encouraged the adults. And the next day, two mothers gave permission for their daughters to sleep at the Centre!

That's how it goes in the desert where the Little Prince lives: stories always end well!

Upcoming Association Events:

Saturday, December 7, 2013 from 10 am – 8 pm

St Nicolas Market at Romont City Hall

Presentation and sale of hand-made objects from Niger, such as chili pepper powder and peanut butter prepared by the girls at our school in Niger.

Thank you for having taken the time to read my newsletter, and for having travelled with me and the children through our small corner of the world!

The girls and boys of the Association school wish you a lovely fall season with wonderful activities in store!

With my warmest thoughts from Zinder, to the sound of locust songs and African drums.

Isabelle Macheret

Zinder Niger, October 9, 2013

www.aucoeurduniger.ch