



# KAWTAL SEHILAABE

DENVER-SENEGAL HUMANITARIAN NEWS

2014 -----Volume 3

## A First Trip to Diaocounda

by Tony LaChance

Members of Denver Senegal Foundation (DSHF) have visited Diorbivol in the northern region of Senegal many times in the past, but, with the exception of the Foundation's President, Theresa Neuroth, had never been to the southern region. This year plans were made for a small contingent of three DSHF members, Theresa Neuroth, Tony and Jordana LaChance and our liaison, Mohamadou Cisse, to travel to Dakar in October to purchase supplies and books for the new school year for schools in Diorbivol and Diaocounda. From there the group would head south to Kounkane and Diaocounda for DSHF's first official visit to the area.

The flight to Dakar was unusually uneventful. Our biggest concern on the twelve hour flight was that the seat-back movie players did not function half the time. Oh the suffering of international travelers! Upon landing in Dakar, Mohamadou Cisse's sister once again

graciously opened her house to us for our stay in the capital. As usual, after landing at 5:30 AM we made a quick trip to her home to drop our bags, freshen up, and exchange currency before heading to the market to purchase books and school supplies for the two villages. In another lucky twist of events, our transactions were completed in just a few hours, and we were ready to procure transportation to Diaocounda. We headed for the "gar" (garage) to find a van to use for the next few days. The sight of three "toubabs" (West African slang for white people) raised quite a ruckus as every driver tried to impress us with how great their vehicles were. In the end we gleefully negotiated

for a van that was like new and had seats with actual padding and intact upholstery. We headed back to home base feeling this trip would be the easiest one we've had.

Up before dawn the next morning, we were eager to load the van and begin the next leg of our journey. As our bags were passed to the driver loading the top, Jordana noticed that the van was NOT the same one we had negotiated for the previous evening. Closer inspection revealed it was equipped with the typical Senegalese hard benches instead of padded seats. There was nothing we could do about the bait and switch so early in the morning. We grudgingly boarded and got on the road early enough to arrive in the village before nightfall.



Streets in Dakar are always packed, and traffic jams are the norm. Even with such an early start it seemed to take forever to reach the outskirts of the city. The road now appeared brand new as it stretched to the horizon. Despite appearances, the new road did not go very far, and soon became littered with potholes the size of our van. In addition, the traffic became chaotic with cars zooming by on both sides of us with no regard for

normal traffic flow. There were times when there were more vehicles on our right going in the opposite direction than were on our left. Our driver was forced to slow to a crawl with valuable time slipping away. In the end the driver opted to take a short cut to Kounkane that was more of a bog than a road. It took 3 hours to travel the last six miles! It was close to midnight when we finally arrived, and everyone's nerves were frazzled. We ate a quick dinner before heading to bed in an outdoor structure. Forty-five minutes later a downpour began, and we were moved into a small concrete room that was hot and humid with absolutely no air flow. Welcome to southern Senegal!

More rested, we arose the next morning with hope of an easier travel day ahead. The distance from Kounkane to Diaocounda is only four miles. On the road again, we also noticed the lush vegetation that surrounded us. Unlike northern Senegal on the edge of the desert, the south gets rain year round. Everything was green, and some of the grasses appeared to be eight to ten feet tall. Just outside of Kounkane we came upon a guard stationed by the turn-off to Diaocounda. We explained where we were headed. He looked at the van skeptically and laughed, wishing us luck as he waved us through. The road was not paved, but appeared to be in good condition. In less than 500 yards all that changed. Soon there were swimming pool size mud puddles where the road should have been. The van was in slow motion, slaloming around water holes and other obstacles. A man on a mountain bike in front of us actually pulled away from us because we were obliged to navigate so slowly. All hopes for a

quick easy trip were dashed. As we inched along it became evident that we were getting further and further from civilization. We saw only a few grass huts. Other than those, there was nothing but trees and grass for miles around. At one point we discovered a street lamp by the side of the road with no sign of anyone around and no power lines. Ironically, someone had actually placed a street lamp in the middle of nowhere.

It took us a couple of hours to reach the footpath that leads to



Diaocounda. From the size of the path it was obvious that very few vehicles had ever been down it. We had no choice but to turn onto the path. Evidence of farming was everywhere with crops ranging from cotton to rice, millet, barley, and corn. This area of Senegal is clearly more self-sustaining than the drier areas of the north. Although the van was cautiously going only a few miles per hour it suddenly came to a sudden crashing stop. Everyone piled out to try to determine the cause of our noisy halt. With such thick vegetation it was difficult to see anything, but it was finally determined that a tree had been cut down and left angled like a spear in the dense growth. The tree had hit the frame of the van near the windshield. If it had been angled half an inch either left or

right, it would have crashed through the window and caused serious injury to the front seat passenger. We proceeded at an even slower pace taking a total of four hours to travel just four miles.

Upon reaching Diaocounda we were greeted by villagers decked out in formal dress eagerly awaiting our arrival to begin a grand celebration. As in Diorbival, celebrations are a time for speeches and salutations. We were regaled with the story of the village as well as several other speeches. Next, because the celebratory feast was not quite ready, we were taken on a tour of the school area. In agrarian areas in Senegal, crops are harvested in late December. Although the school year usually begins in October, parents have no way of paying the supply fees required before students can begin school until they sell their harvest. For this reason, in many cases, school does not start until January in these areas. The school year is not extended, however. The teachers are expected to squeeze what would normally be taught in 9 months into only 5. It is no wonder that only 2% of students were passing the mandatory 6th grade



test, and the majority of students didn't make it past the 6th grade. Because DSHF has been providing books and supplies the last few years, in this village,

school has been able to start on time.

We were shown the bricks that were recently made for construction of the first grade classroom using the money sent



by DSHF. But we were also shown two brand new classrooms! We had no idea who had built or paid for them. After several attempts to communicate our surprise, we finally figured it out. Apparently, the government had started construction of the classrooms sometime in the past ten years, but after it became apparent that very few students were passing the sixth grade exam, construction was halted. The classrooms remained unfinished. Then in 2009 DSHF made a connection with the village and began providing books and supplies to the elementary students. By 2011, the sixth grade pass rate on the mandatory tests



had gone from only 2% to 100%. At that point the government resumed construction on the classrooms. In addition, the middle school in the next village has had to expand to accommodate all the students that are ready for the next phase of their education. The school supplies and books provided by DSHF have made a huge impact on this remote area. After a long but satisfying day in Diaocounda we experienced the long drive back to Kounkane for the second time.



The next day, our driver refused to take us on a short sight-seeing drive around Kounkane. He felt he

had been deceived about the difficulty of this assignment. He stayed at the compound all day listening to the car radio, draining the van's battery; a fact that would impact us for the rest of our trip.

The next morning we were ready to leave before sunrise for the long trip back to Dakar. And of course, the van engine would not start. From 5:30 to 11:00 am, we helped push the van up and down the streets of Kounkane trying to jump start the engine, with no luck. Fortunately for us, a car driving through the village volunteered to jump the battery. Finally, we began our journey back to the capital arriving in Dakar just before midnight. At this point the van stalled again, and the driver informed us we were on our own! Luckily, we were able to flag down a taxi to get us to Cisse's sister's home. You always have to be ready to go to plans B, C, and D when traveling in Senegal!

Although this was a difficult trip in many ways, even for some native Senegalese, we were able to determine that the support DSHF is providing is making a huge impact on the lives of hundreds of students in these isolated areas. This year over 550 students were supplied with essentials for their education. This small amount of aid will impact these students for years to come.

### **Meet the Board - Vice President Linda Rebrovic**

After many years as an active member of DSHF, I am happy to serve as Vice President of our Foundation. My husband, Steve, and I have been married for 38 years and have lived in Littleton, Colorado for 28 years, raising three daughters now all in their twenties. In addition to my life as a wife and mother, I have worked for 40 years as a dental hygienist both in private practice and as a clinical dental hygiene instructor. I completed a Master of Science degree in Education after my dental hygiene training and have thoroughly enjoyed educating my patients as well as many hygiene students.

Our first daughter, Kate, traveled with a group of youth and parents to Diorbivol, Senegal in 2003, shortly after her Freshman year of college. As a graduate of Columbine High School, she wanted to make a positive difference in the world. Family members of this group began meeting to provide ongoing help for the education of the children of Senegal, growing to become DSHF. I know we are making a profound difference in their lives. My husband and I placed a high value on education for our children, and it makes us happy to help our friends in Senegal.

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

It has been four years since the principal of the elementary school in the remote village of Diaocounda requested Denver Senegal Humanitarian Foundation's assistance to build a permanent classroom for the first grade class. At the time our organization was reluctant to undertake such a large, costly project. DSHF's mission had always been to provide books and school supplies. After much heartfelt discussion, we realized that supplies couldn't really be effective for these young children if their outdoor classroom did not provide a proper learning environment. We decided to take on the project.

Progress has been slow, but the classroom is finally taking shape. The first installment of funds was sent last year to begin construction of bricks. Because of its remoteness, it is difficult to transport cement products when the roads and paths are dry. It is impossible during the rainy season. And since there are no protected areas to store supplies once they arrive, we waited to give the village more money until we were in country. In October, a contingent took the second installment over to Diaocounda. As soon as the roads were sufficiently dry, the cement supplies were purchased and the walls began to rise. It is satisfying to see the progress, but it has been a slow road, much like those in Senegal!

This project has allowed DSHF to experience the difficulties as well as the joys of extending ourselves beyond our usual boundaries. We have had to overcome several roadblocks such as the rising cost of cement and transportation. Just when we thought we had raised enough money for one phase of construction, we found that prices had gone up. However, the excitement on students' faces as bricks were being formed near their thatch classroom was contagious - even in a picture sent from across the Atlantic. That excitement encouraged our fundraising efforts. But standing in the village this past October and observing firsthand the results of our efforts has given us the satisfaction and knowledge that this project is making a big difference in the lives of the children and the entire village.

The new classroom is full of excited first graders, and all the students are doing well on their mandatory tests. The improvement of elementary test scores enabling more students to move on to middle school has gained the attention of the Senegalese government. According to the middle school principal, the government will be making improvements at the secondary level. Would these things have happened if DSHF were not involved? Possibly, but much of the success began after we began providing books and supplies.

I ask you to help DSHF create an even greater number of contagious smiles. Your donation will provide desks for the new classroom and the books and supplies needed for the students to continue their education. Join us in providing the everlasting gift of education. It will most definitely change lives.

Jam tan (peace only),

Theresa Neuroth



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### DSHF OFFICERS

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### MISSION

DSHF, a non-profit foundation, is organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. DSHF's purpose is to specialize in the enhancement of the education of Senegalese students and the distribution of humanitarian aid in Senegal.

The Denver-Senegal Humanitarian Foundation is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Donations are tax-deductible.

"KAWTAL SEHILAABE" means group of friends in Pulaar, a language spoken in Senegal. This newsletter is published by DSHF.

Editor - Janet Shin

## Women's Work

by Theresa Neuroth

The workday for a rural Senegalese woman begins before dawn and doesn't end until after sunset. Her responsibilities depend on her age and status within the extended family who make up her household. Because of the lack of household amenities, maintaining a household requires the long hours and physical efforts of many women working together.

The day begins with household chores such as sweeping, starting breakfast, and washing dishes from the previous night's dinner. Sweeping is required to remove the dust tracked into the house from the previous day and is followed by sweeping the dirt area immediately outside the home. Debris is removed from around the huts or brick home as an artistic design is created with the broom on the bare ground. The yard remains attractive only until someone walks across the compound disturbing the dirt.

Once breakfast, often a type of porridge, is eaten, the children leave for school, and the women continue their designated work routine. Water must be drawn and carried from the well for various uses. Urns will be filled with drinking water; dishes will be washed; very young children will be bathed; and laundry will be done by hand and hung over a fence to dry.



After the morning chores are completed, it is time to plan for the other daily meals. A trip to the market is necessary to purchase items for lunch and dinner. The mid-day meal, a rice-based dish with sauces that vary from day to day, can then be prepared. Most family members return to the compound to eat and then rest. Often, one of the men will prepare tea, and everyone will relax during the hottest period of the day. During this break the women wash the lunch dishes, and if it is really hot, they will bathe the young children again to help keep them cool. The school-age children return to school.



The Senegalese are very attentive to family and neighbors. If someone needs help, a female family member often visits in the afternoon to provide assistance. Women also use afternoons to complete other household chores like shelling peanuts, making peanut butter, tending the household garden, or attending to crops after they're harvested. During the rainy season, some women work in the fields until lunch and return to the fields later in the day when the temperature moderates.

By late afternoon the women begin to prepare dinner. It is usually served about an hour after sunset. Following the evening meal the family relaxes, often drinking tea again and talking and listening to the radio. Sometimes neighbors will visit before everyone retires for the day. This routine will be repeated again, day after day throughout the year, broken only for holidays, and altered only during the rainy season when women work in the fields.

**Direct DSHF Donation**

*Seeda, seeda . . .*

*Little by little . . .*

*Brick by brick . . .*

\_\_\_\_\_ Donation toward first-grade desks in Diaocounda. \$\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will provide books and supplies for \_\_\_\_\_ students for an academic year at a cost of \$\_\_\_\_\_. (\$20 provides books and supplies for one student for one year.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Other donation amount. \$\_\_\_\_\_.

\*100% of your donation to DSHF is tax deductible

**Send this form with your check payable to DSHF to: PO Box 271043  
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