

**K**oidu feels a long, long way from Nova Scotia. But we've finally arrived in this woe-begotten diamond town to witness the work NSGA's Sierra Leone program (NSSLP) is doing even in remote corners of the country. Koidu is the epicentre of the country's diamond fields. In recent decades it has offered up billions of dollars worth of the glittering gems to the world. What does it have to show for this? Ruins, no running water, no electricity, no roads worthy of the name, shanty towns with panbody (tin) huts, and wrenching poverty. "Blood diamonds" fuelled the 11-year-long civil war in this country and Koidu was at the very heart of it. It could be enormously depressing.

The first school we visit, Koidu Secondary School, doesn't bode well either, at least not at first sight. Razor wire and murals painted on the walls by UN peacekeepers that made this school their military base during the war are stark reminders of the horrors of the recent past. But inside that school, we learn there is something far more precious and beautiful in Koidu than diamonds - the enthusiastic students who greet us. They are filled with energy, curiosity and a raging thirst for education. NSGA's hard-working and committed Sierra Leonean staff have been training a Peer Health Education team here and they've mastered a whole repertoire of skits with health messages. After a hearty welcome, the team insists on putting on an impromptu skit outside in the hot sun.

The entire school gathers around the "stage", a concrete slab, to watch the drama unfold. A conceited and wealthy Chief, recently widowed, is demanding that a young female student marry him. She refuses, insisting he take an HIV test. The Chief thinks his positive HIV test confirms that everything about him is positive, superior. Laughter erupts, but the serious health message of the skit is not lost on the audience, as the young woman explains to him what HIV is, how it can be prevented and treated, but not cured.

I wipe at my face, thinking at first it's just sweat trickling down my face. But no, these young people have moved me to tears - happy ones. Reminded me, yet again, of the incredible resilience to be found in Africa, and the overwhelming desire you find among people even in war-ravaged countries to improve education, lives and whole countries, never mind the odds. These youth are the country's real gems.

# The Real Gems of Sierra Leone



# My Sweet Salone



## Football in Sweet Salone

We targeted footballers for HIV education and testing because football is akin to religion in Sierra Leone, much like hockey is in Canada. These amputee footballers were both former soldiers and war victims in the hardest-hit town of Kailahun. These gentlemen did not disappoint and most showed up on the first day. They invited us to watch one of their early morning practices, and played with such intensity and passion. It was one of the most inspiring and humbling things I've ever witnessed in my life.

## The VCCT Bandaïd

Mr. Koroma, manager for the drivers' union office in Makeni, generously kept watch over the locals and us ensuring a smooth flow to our days there. Everyone who came to get tested got a Bandaïd, like a badge of honour, on the finger we pricked. While it may not have the same significance as the ink stained finger of the voting Afghanis, to me it represented a similar step towards a greater good.

## Kids at the market

The reasons why we do all of this NGO work - the kids, "the future". These kids were across from the drivers' union office in Kailahun and yelled at me to come take their picture. They smiled sheepishly when I showed it to them afterwards. I remember thinking how desperately I wanted them to get to secondary school and join a Peer Health Educator program. Then I was the sheepish one who later realized they should have been in school that very morning.

## At the market

Market women were another one of our target populations for the VCCT (HIV education and testing) program in Sierra Leone. They did come as long as the line wasn't too long and often brought their goods with them. We were in the heart of the market in Kenema bustling with its grain, fruit, fabric, and fish vendors. The energy was infectious and in the organized chaos, this lady called out to me to take her picture. I have never seen anyone look so proud of her work!

# How Do The Women Do It?

Now, I can't sit here and tell you that while I was in The Gambia I was hand-washing my clothes. That would be a lie. But I can tell you I hand-washed my underwear and it was actually much harder than you would think. The best place to have them dry was over my bed, hanging from the mosquito net, being dried by the fan and the heat. It was actually a very funny experience. For one, I don't think I have ever really washed all of my underwear by hand, and, secondly, hanging them over my bed and lying down for a nap. You can see by the photo it was a pretty funny sight. Not something I will forget!

We had a lady named Jainaba who would come into the house about three times a week to do our laundry, but we did not want to give her our dirty underwear to wash. I definitely had a new found respect for Jainaba after I had to wash my underwear. I was absolutely exhausted after washing a few small pairs of my underwear! My back ached, I was sweating and ready for a nap. I couldn't imagine washing all the clothing and bedding for six girls in one day! I really don't know how she did it.



## Canada vs. The Gambia vs. The Gambian National Army!



I am a distance runner and couldn't wait to experience beach running at its most tropical finest. I expected glorious runs under the African Sun; I didn't expect to meet the most beloved running partners of my life. My first partner was named Spiderman (not after Peter Parker but because a spider protected Mohammed). I met him on my first day at Fajara beach. "You are Highly Welcome to the Gambia!" he exclaimed, clasp my hands. "Black and White unite!" Spiderman was the (volunteer) lifeguard and we soon discovered our common love of running, leading to a standing 6am date. It's important to run before the hot rainy season sun is up.

The beach was about 800 metres from my front door. We ran along the peaceful bathtub water of the Atlantic. When we reached our turn-around, Spider would mischievously say, "now we do training," wanting to do push-ups and sit-ups. I would reply, "running IS white girl training!" After, we'd jump into the ocean, cool down, then walk 800m home. Eventually our jovial running banter led to the need for a race. The race turned into a comical big-deal event on the beach, Canada vs. Gambia in 2000m. Beach friends set up a start and finish line. Some outrageous spontaneous supporters, The Gambian military (who were R&Ring at a beach hotel), were secured to cheer for Canada. Local beach friends cheered their boy. The race was "tight" but alas Spider's finishing kick was too strong and he took the gold. We held a medal ceremony on podiums (lawn chairs) and our multicultural group of 15 sang the Gambian and Canadian national anthems.

I met Musa or "Tiger" that night. He was a soldier in The Gambian National Army, freshly returned from peacekeeping in Darfur and we soon became a running trio. Tiger was bone tired from his tour of duty yet kept pace and kept vocal-lead, chanting army songs as we ran. He needed to process his experience in Darfur and we spoke about it often. One last race between the three of us marked the end of my Gambian running career; this time with the finish lined by fun loving soldiers in their army fatigues.

Two years later, still running, I treasure Tiger & Spider's indomitable spirits on the road.

Teaching in an open schoolroom during the Gambian rainy season, with deafening rain on the tin roof and scattered wildlife squawking is something else. While I was amazed daily by the noise, I was most amazed by our young Gambian students.

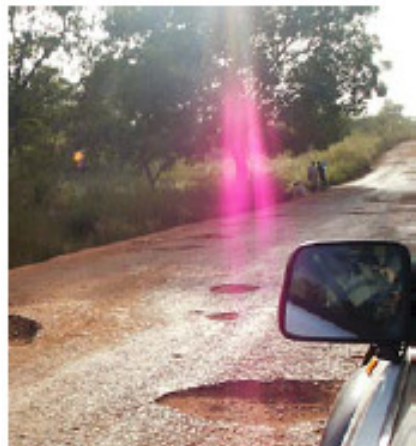
Reproductive health was a major focus and we started our lessons with some giggles. After sternly sharing that we were there to learn serious subjects in a safe place where they can ask anything, we experienced a pivotal revelation. Gambian youth LOVE to ask questions! And they love learning. Orgasm was a new vocabulary word and our students wanted to understand it. Fully. Through questions: “How do you get one? How long does it last? What does it feel like? How will I know I have it? How many can you have in one day? Where do you do it? How do you make it come back?” And on and on! Our students continued to ask bold and brave questions daily, doing a wonderful job preparing to teach others.

The most amazing dialogue shared in our class was about living with HIV. I asked my students, “How does a person with HIV remain healthy?” In Canada, the answer may be good medical care, nutrition etc. Our Gambian youth replied, “They need love and caring and understanding; hope for the future; and a positive attitude.” Heartfelt comments like this exemplify what a warm, kind and compassionate people Gambians are. When I think of my students, I see them as they are in this sweet and lovely photo of our teenage students, some as old as 18 & 19 years, sitting three to a two-person desk, often with their arms around each other. The Gambia is full to the brim with wonderful humanity. I’m fortunate to have shared a small slice.

# School is in!



# Don't Eat a Bushrat While Pregnant



The flesh of our forearms and ankles ravaged by multitudes of voracious mosquitoes, sand-flies, angry ants, and probably countless other elusive arthropods infesting the inlands along the Gambian River, we were grateful to return from Upriver intact, albeit not unblemished. The herds of cattle, sheep, and baboons that infiltrate the Gambia's "highway" system, made our 300 kilometers trek upriver most entertaining. The excitement, however, was easily masked by the joyless wave of nausea and head pain that erupts from a relentless eight-hour battle with a corrupt road system engulfed by endless crater-size pot-holes, which sent our tattered bodies flailing against one another. We don't know if we felt more pity for the NSGA vehicle, our driver, or its passengers.

In the end, despite the cockroaches on our rice, toads in our sandals, and bugs in our hair, we did indeed have a most memorable experience in the Gambia. It is our hope that with each school we visited in the Peer Health Educators program, we and the NSGA team may effect some change that will save a nation from the HIV scourge devouring other countries in Africa.

From the youths we met, we have no doubts these hopes will be realized because there are some exquisitely bright young minds in the Gambia and they will lead this nation out of poverty and illness.

In the meantime, they informed us one should not eat a bushrat during pregnancy or else the child will grow up to be a thief. But by the same token, we were able to avert them from believing that eating eggs during pregnancy will result in a "dumb" child. As you can see, one cannot escape these encounters unchanged.

# Janjangbureh Island

My fondest memories of living and working in the Gambia are on Janjangbureh Island, a small island in the Gambia River in the Central River Division, where I lived temporarily with NSGA staff and a fellow intern. Janjangbureh has a rich culture and history and a vibrant community. It was used as a site in the transatlantic slave trade, and the buildings are still standing and are open to visitors. This provided an interesting learning opportunity in addition to the work with NSGA.

The days spent teaching and working with the peer health educators at the Janjangbureh Upper Basic School were full of energy, fun, and laughter. The students were eager to learn and participate in all activities. Outside the classroom, we had plenty of laughs playing games in the schoolyard like the human knot and singing songs. We always had students to walk us home and drink sodas with at the local store. We also spent plenty of time with local children who accompanied us everywhere. I fondly remember a little girl named Lea who I would share a Fanta with in the evenings. She was worried I would forget her name and reminded me each day. It has been two years and I still remember her very well!

The very high temperatures sometimes made doing things difficult. We, of course, were near the water. Staying so close to the river meant lots of boat rides and afternoon swims to cool down after teaching. This gave us the opportunity to reflect on the day and develop the close friendships that are still going strong today.

Janjangbureh is special for several reasons, particularly memories of time spent with the locals and NSGA staff. Although it was a bumpy and dusty drive to get to the island, it was well worth the trip!



# Enthusiasm for Learning



The first thing I did when accepted into the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) program at Dalhousie University was seek out opportunities to volunteer abroad. It didn't take long to find out about Dalhousie's connection to the NSGA. A few meetings, several vaccinations and a summer's worth of lesson plans later, I was on my way to The Gambia.

One of four nursing students and four teachers, I would be teaching a health component in the NSGA's Peer Education program. Sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS and stigma, and healthy relationships formed my main teaching subjects.

I was excited and I could not wait to get there! That was until I found myself standing in a classroom with no electricity and giant holes in the concrete floors, a chalkboard that we had to paint on the wall the day before, hand-drawn posters I made with markers and, in front of me, 35 seventh grade students who could not understand my Canadian accent! Needless to say things only got better.

I spent one of the most memorable summers of my life in The Gambia. I've included a few pictures showing me with my students - smart, energetic, talented boys and girls - who went on to share all of the information they learned with their schools and communities.

The pictures I have included are of the banner outside the school entrance, my grade 7 class and sharing a cold drink with a student. The fourth photo, my favorite, is of me and five young men in my classroom. The two on either side of me came most days during lunch to read my textbooks and ask me questions - typical of the Gambian students and their great enthusiasm for learning.

# Nova Scotia Gambia Exchange



Upon Gilles Poirier's return from The Gambia in 1987, the communities North of Smokey were linked with Darsilame, a village in the Upper River Division. The students from Highland Consolidated School exchanged letters and our communities began to raise funds for this rural village. In July 1990, Gilles and Debby travelled on another project and returned to Darsilame. They presented the village with school and sports supplies, a donkey and this cart and farming tools.

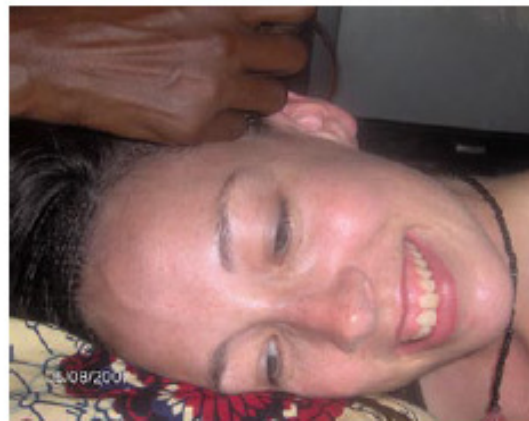


I vividly remember the first day we travelled on the minibus during our 1990 summer visit. We had stopped for a bathroom break. The men trooped to the bush on one side and the women gingerly stepped into the vegetation on the opposite side. I did not see any creatures but what I did view was someone's sunburned rear end. Of course, I exclaimed-"Look at her sunburn!" She was very embarrassed but that did not stop a friendship that is still strong today.

In August/September 1990 four Gambian students and two of their teachers stayed in the North of Smokey area. They were part of the Nova Scotia Gambia Student Exchange. The Gambians were billeted with the seven Cabot Junior Senior High students who later visited The Gambia. While in Cape Breton, the group participated in a variety of activities from hikes to an "early" Christmas social to this whale watching tour. The Gambians found our Cape Breton weather chilly and required many layers of clothing on our outdoor adventures.



## Hair Plaiting



One of my favourite days in the Gambia involved spending the day at Marie Chorr's compound in Bakau. Erin and I met at Blue Bar at 11:00 a.m. and grabbed a bush taxi to Bakau (always an adventure to take a bush taxi, but we were definitely starting to get the hang of it!). When we arrived, Marie called her friend and hairdresser Fatoumaney to see if she would come to plait our hair. We had some time before Fatoumaney would arrive so Marie took Erin and I on a little tour of Bakau.

Bakau was quiet and lovely. Not as much hassle as in tourist areas, and absolutely beautiful. We returned to Marie's compound, where there were several different families living. This is not typical of most compounds, which usually have all extended family living there. Fatoumaney arrived and she began working on the hair plaiting. It took around two hours for each of us to get our hair done. It's a timely process, but with a beautiful result!

Some children on the compound were very interested with the Toubabs (white people) hanging out. Shyly, they eventually came forward when the curiosity became too much and they came over to check it out.

Marie had bought us some soft drinks for a lovely treat. Then we had the best part of all: a beautiful homemade meal created by Marie's mother (Mama Africa). She spent all morning working on it over a small fire. It was the best meal I had in the Gambia - rice, chicken with a brown sauce, potatoes and another vegetable, all so flavourful. We shared our meal from a communal bowl. Fatoumaney thought we should have spoons rather than eat with our hands. However, Erin and I had done this before and we were up for the challenge. Erin and I shared an amazing day thanks to the generosity of Marie Chorr, Mama Africa and Fatoumaney.

# We have to sleep in what??

I think we can all agree one of the biggest adjustments to Gambian life is the extreme heat, both during the day and at night. It seemed you always felt sweaty and sticky, as if covered with sand and dirt from walking around. Even after hopping out of the shower, you would instantly go back to the sticky, too hot feeling. It seemed you could never feel clean or refreshed or cooled off for very long. At nighttime, we had to sleep in mosquito nets to keep the bugs away. They came out around dusk and filled our home. We faced the task of preparing the net for bedtime. That involved tucking it all around the edges of the bed, then trying to sneak in through a small opening you had left for yourself. While maneuvering to get into bed, you also tried to keep the net intact and tucked in. Then, once inside, you had to tuck in the last part behind you and attempt to lie down and get comfortable in the heat, while not disturbing your net. Our bedroom routine became quite the feat!

Even this simple routine became yet another example of the day-to-day tasks the Gambian people have to endure, and reminded us of how lucky we were back home with our seemingly easy lifestyle. These simple moments were humbling and made me think how wonderful the Gambian people are to have a more difficult lifestyle and more to endure. Yet they never seem to complain and are such a happy people. We should be so lucky as to follow their lead and be grateful for what we have. For this, and many other reasons, I really miss the Smiling Coast!

