

WE BUILT A SCHOOL...

In a little tiny village, thousands of miles from anyplace you would imagine, just down the river from Timbuktu, thirty-eight small children run anxiously to school. By American standards you would think the teacher was handing out candy. But on this day the teacher was not there to greet the students. The door-less entrance to the one-room, millet-stalk school was empty. The teacher was still nestled comfortably in his new straw hut, sleeping. The children ran the few hundred meters to his home. They thought they needed to remind him of his responsibilities as their teacher. They were saddened to hear the news. "It's Saturday" Alhadji Amadou yelled from under his blankets.

The children of Lokkal Tokrast, which is Tamacheque for "School of Betterment," have been coming together since November 9th, 2000. It is hard to believe that just five years ago the children entered the dusty, very organic, school house for the first time. Upon receiving their first piece of chalk, thinking it was candy, they ate it. That seems like ages ago since now the children can read and write "idi" (dog), "ax" (milk), and share the same mild manner and eagerness to learn as any of their American counterparts. I awake in the morning to cantons of counting in Tamacheque, French and even English. Children run by my house, as if to show off yelling "one-two-tree-fo-foive."

The morning and afternoons are long and hot but the day is barely done, school isn't finished until six p.m. Alhadji, the school director and teacher, then spends the mild desert nights hovered next to a kerosene lantern correcting notebooks and planning lessons for history, mathematics, writing, reading, art, and music. Between sips of green tea he looks up at the stars. As if he was given a heavenly answer he puts his head back down to the paper and feverishly writes, interrupted only by the sounds of the clanging of an old tire iron. The men are being called to the school and the women are summoned to the empty hut next to the chief's hut. It is ten o'clock at night and while I am outside tying up mosquito netting and setting up my bed I greet the men and women as they make their way to literacy classes.

Two men were sent to Tahoua, a desert town a few hundred kilometers from the village of Kabey Fo, where they learned the pedagogy for teaching adults how to read, write and perform simple mathematics in their native language. Ibrahim and Akline returned from the training with a renewed image of themselves and an astounding confidence that surpasses the value of any training fee. The former began classes in January with about ten men and the latter with about 10 women in February. Many evenings, I sit in the shadows of the flickering lanterns and quietly observe these men and women as they work towards pronouncing different letter combinations. The miracle occurs when the letters turn from a mumble into a real audible word. Nothing is quite so gratifying in development work as seeing your once illiterate friend look over their shoulder at you with that grin that says "hey ...did you hear that?...I just read *camel!*" I nod and smile back assuredly.

In the past few years I watched the lifelessness vanish from the children's eyes and a sense of accomplishment move into the eyes of the older men and women. The same people that used to flip through my Newsweek's upside-down, now page through them showing me all the letters they know and trying to pronounce words like "cyber-space." Then they ask me to explain it. Although, the people of Kabey Fo might not ever be able to grasp the concept of "cyber-space" what they have grasped is the desire to learn.

They have come to truly understand and appreciate the importance of education. Kabey Fo is proud of their school and literacy program, as should you be. The many donors organized by Melissa McCarthy of Washington, DC. Lucy Spoerk of Muskego, Wisconsin, Peace Corps Partnership, Bearing Point Gift Match and the student Council of Theodore H. Faller Elementary School, Ridgecrest, CA and the hard work and commitment of Alhadji, Ibrahim, and Akline have forced the languid spirit out of Kabey Fo. You all have given the people of Kabey Fo a chance! Isuf would not be prancing about the village as the prized student, Mariama would be spending her days pounding millet, Akmut would pass his life sitting under the shade trees looking blankly into the desert, and Hamid would still have to wait for a literate villager to arrive before he could make a sale at his boutique.

Day after day, I have watched these village activities become rituals. Children run from school to the class garden, or walk to the well to see what new design or word will be etched into the concrete surface. Alhadji gives me a tall two-handed wave from the soccer field during the 10 o'clock recess and maroon uniformed kids run about. I have nightly conversations with a previously illiterate man who will nonchalantly scribble his name in the sand. This village is forever changed, even if the drought takes away their animals, the government takes away their land, the rains don't come, or the crop fails. The people of Kabey Fo will not fail and no one will be able to take away what they have learned. Thanks to our sponsors and know that none of this could have happened if it weren't for each and every one of you. Thank you!