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Building friendships in St Louis, Senegal

For the last three months I have been living in Saint-Louis, Senegal. The aim of my trip was to get work experience in a local hospital, volunteer at a centre for local children, improve my French and learn about the Senegalese culture. In September I will be going in to my third and final year of University studying anatomy and human biology. After finishing I intend to pursue a medical profession, and so this was an invaluable experience.

While I was in Saint-Louis I lived with a local family in a neighbourhood called Djamaguene. The family was very large. My host 'mum' and 'dad' were retired. Their two sons and daughter-in-laws lived with them, along with their collective three children. Three of their cousins lived with us as well as around 6-10 young men who my mum has taken in. My family was reasonable well off for the area and my mum believed in giving and sharing if you had the means. I loved living in such a large house. My mum was so nice and I learnt a lot from her during evenings we spent together, including about her life, previous volunteers she's had to stay and the culture. It was always fun to play with the children and they were normally pretty well-behaved! We ate lunch and dinner together, sitting on the floor sharing a dish. I was fortunate enough to be there during the month of Ramadam. I was able to see how hard it was for my family, as well as other local people I knew. During this time we obviously didn't have lunch together but dinner was always an event, with lots of food and spending a lot of time together afterwards.



Top: Me and some of the children in the traditional dress.

Bottom left: Me, Michelle (another volunteer) with our host mum, Madame Camara, on the evening of Korité (the last day of Ramadam).

Bottom right: Mama, one of the children, on the morning of Korité preparing breakfast.



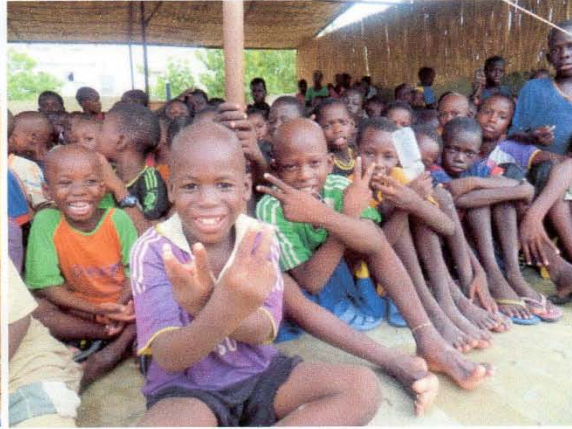
In the mornings I was working in a local hospital called Districte Sanitaire. As I don't have much medical experience it was more like work experience, with me learning from the nurses and observing. However, I was able to get involved with some things and help out. For example I was honoured to be able to see some women giving birth. I was then given the responsibility of weighing and measuring the new born babies. I also gained experience of taking blood pressure, treating wounds and working in the laboratory. I wouldn't have been able to any of this if it hadn't been for the amazing nurses who worked there. The hospital has two doctors, who mainly do administrative work and some consultations, but the majority of the work is completed by well-trained nurses. I spent time in the maternity, paediatric and minor injury departments, as well as the laboratory, where I met some very kind nurses. They showed and explained exactly what they did and then allowed me to help and treat patients. They didn't need to take time out to do this with me but they did, so I'm very appreciative!



Top left: The hospital's entrance. It's quite a small hospital.
Top right: Me and Hady, one of the nurses I got on very well with. She became my 'mentor' while I was in the minor injury department.
Bottom: Re-bandaging a patient's operation incision.

In the afternoons I worked at a Talibé centre. Talibé's are children who learn the Quran from Marabouts (teachers) in Daras (where they live). Some Daras can be nice but in Saint-Louis they were very basic and the children didn't have a lot. This meant that they ended up getting lots of wounds, especially on their feet as they didn't all have shoes. It was very hard to see this, and showed just how hard their lives can be. I hope that through the healthcare given at the centre their health improves and they feel cared for and loved. The focus of Daras is to teach the Quran, which means that for the majority they don't get any other education. The centre was there to offer French and English lessons as well as give the children basic

medical care. My main role was in the health section, which involved going to the Daras to treat the children's wounds or illnesses, or treating them at the centre. I occasionally gave some English lessons as well when we were short of volunteers. The centre also provides a little meal on Friday afternoons, which involves baguettes with chocolate spread and juice. I helped prepare this and give it out. Friday afternoons were always hectic and busy as a lot more children would come to the centre (not all were Talibé children, but from local families) and they would get very excited and noisy!



Top left: My goodbye photo with the staff, volunteers and some of the children!

Top right: Children waiting for the meal on Friday.

Bottom: Treating a child's wound.

The organisation I went with is called 'Projects Abroad' and they have an office in Saint-Louis. This meant that I got to know the staff well, especially as they organised and came to a lot of evening socials. We had a quiz every Wednesday and went to hear a live band every Friday after work. There were a lot of volunteers, from all over the world. I had room-mates from France, Canada and Holland. I met other volunteers from Japan, England, America, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and probably others I can't remember. I made some amazing friends out of the other volunteers, through working with them as well as spending my free time with them. It was so interesting meeting all these people and learning a bit about their culture. I know that if I ever visit these countries I will have friends to visit!



My goodbye photos with the current volunteers and on the right, the staff.

During my time in Senegal I was also able to attend a local church. It was great to see how accepting the locals are and my family were very happy for me to attend church. It was nice to meet more people there, and the minister's wife took me under her wing and really welcomed me. There are some American missionaries who work with the church's community projects (schools and clinics) so it was nice to ask them about their experience of Senegal. On my last Sunday they invited me round for lunch and so I got to get to know them better and learn about their experiences in the different areas of Senegal as they've travelled a lot. They are a lovely family I hope to stay in touch with.



Me and Feluine, the minister's wife.

This trip has given me invaluable experience of healthcare in Senegal and I have learnt new skills and knowledge, such as treating minor wounds. I have made friends throughout the world, not just Senegal and I have loved getting to know my family and all the people I met there. Every day was different and has allowed me to overcome challenges and learn, helping me to grow as a person and shape how I apply myself to tasks. I want to say thank you so much GIFT for sponsoring me to go to Saint-Louis. I would have really struggled to afford this without the generosity of GIFT. This has been a life-changing experience which I will never forget and has helped to give me ideas for my future. I truly hope to stay in touch with the people I've met over the last three months and always remember the lessons I've learnt.

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