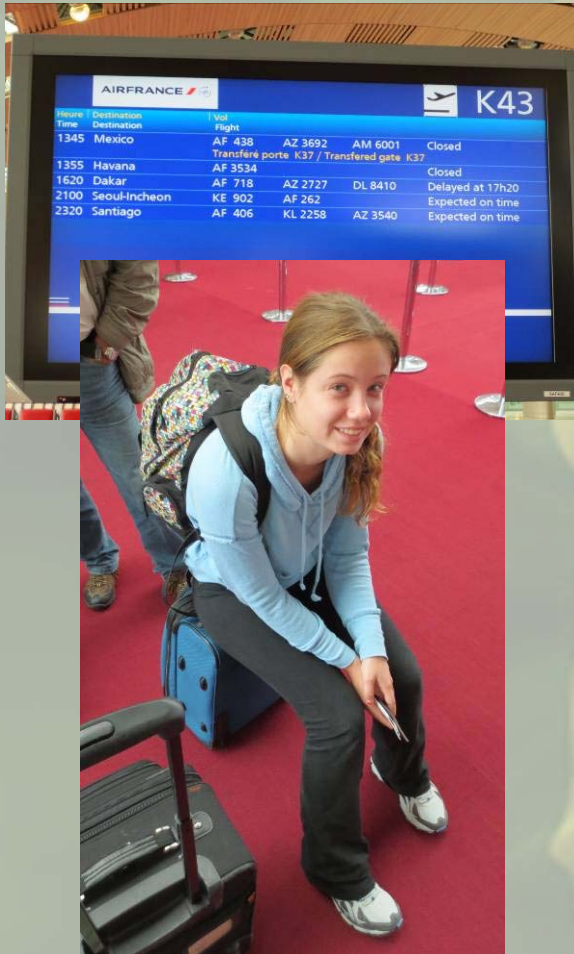


The background of the slide is a blurred image of the Senegalese flag, which consists of three vertical stripes of green, yellow, and red, with a white star in the center of the yellow stripe.

# The Street Boys of Senegal

By Ann Pille

# A Life Changing Journey



My journey to Africa started in December 2011. At that time I mentioned to my aunt that I would have to complete a personal project to graduate from the International Baccalaureate Program at my high school. My aunt Karen, who is a nurse, works all around the world as a medical researcher and she was planning a trip to Senegal to volunteer for an organization called Maison de la Gare. She invited me to come and, after my parents did some research on the country, I accepted. Looking back I really had no idea what I was getting myself into, but it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

# Some Facts about Senegal



Senegal is a small country about the size of South Dakota. It is located in Western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania. It has a total area of 196,722 sq km and a population of about 12,969,600 people. It was a French colony so the official language is French. Some other languages spoken are Wolof, Pulaar, Jola and Mandinka. Most of the population originates from the indigenous people. The main religion is Islam, however 5% of the population is Roman Catholic. Senegal is a republic and, despite a couple of small conflicts, is one of the most stable countries in Africa. The newest government was elected and transitioned in peacefully.

# Culture

Senegal is a very culturally rich country. The people originate from local tribes. 43.3% of the population is Wolof, 23.8% is Pular, 14.7% is Serer, 3.7% is Jola, 3% is Mandinka, 1.1% is Soninke, 1% are European and Lebanese, and 9.4% come from other origins. With such widespread ethnic origins there is great cultural diversity and acceptance.

It is a country with a great amount of beautiful art. A good example of this are the masks. People used to carry these masks to identify which tribe they were from, kind of like a passport. Because they were a symbol of the tribe people took great pride in them. They are intricate and beautiful. The culture of Senegal is also strongly represented in its music. The artists are popular in Europe and Senegal has an internationally recognized jazz festival.



# The Situation



In Senegal, religion is a large part of the culture. Traditionally young boys were sent to a marabout (Koranic teacher) to learn the Koran and the virtue of humility. The boys were to spend most of the day studying Islam and memorizing the Koran with a small period of time allocated to begging in order to learn humility. This practice worked very well but it has been twisted in modern times. The marabouts have now moved their schools to the large cities and the boys are now sent far from the protection of their parents. They are forced to beg for up to 10 hours in the street to get money and food for their marabouts. They spend very little time learning the Koran and are often beaten and sexually abused. They live in conditions that are inhuman. The situation has been twisted from a religious practice to an outrageous abuse of human rights.

# The Marabout

According to the Collins English Dictionary a Marabout is a Muslim holy man of North Africa. They are there to pass on the knowledge that they have of the Koran to the future generations and heal those who are sick. This however has changed in recent centuries. Marabouts have moved their schools from the country to the city, and with them, the boys. They have taken advantage of the situation and forced the children to beg to fill their own pockets. They say that begging will help the boys learn humility and that it has always been done. This is true, however the situation has been twisted. The boys did not traditionally beg all day everyday. The marabout's job is to teach the Koran and help guide young men, not to take advantage of them. Some marabouts are better than others. Some treat the boys as best they can. As in all situations there are varying ranges of cruelty. Some marabouts are victims of the system as well. They are also very important men in Senegalese culture. This is why in order to make a change in the situation you must develop a good relationship with the marabouts and work with them rather than against them.



# The Boys

The word talibé is derived from an Arabic word meaning follower or discipline. It refers to the boys which a marabout teaches the Koran. There are roughly 50,000 of these boys in Senegal. They range in age from 3 to 20 years old. In order to recruit talibé the marabouts go to different villages and convince the parents of the child that he will have a good life living in the city with them, learning the Koran. This is often not very difficult as some families have more children than they can take care of. These children often come from the north and south of Senegal but can also be from the bigger cities. Some parents see giving their child to the marabout as a way to escape the responsibilities of being a parent. Some children even come from neighboring countries such as Gambia. Since the children are brought across the border with the intent of exploiting them for money it is considered child trafficking. When the boys arrive in the city they are scared and alone but hopeful for a better future. However they often face physical and sexual abuse from other talibés, marabouts or the people that they must interact with every day on the street.



# The Daara

The daara is the place that the talibés live while learning the Koran with a marabout. They are supposed to be clean but humble. In reality they are often buildings that are in ruin. Many are of the size of a classroom in north America and can house up to 70 boys. The children often sleep on dirt floors which can lead to skin diseases. There is very little shelter which is a big problem during the rainy season when intense rainstorms can cause water to reach knee height and during the winter when temperatures can drop to 9 c. More often than not they do not have running water and there are very limited toilet facilities. Because of overcrowding and poor sanitation diseases spread very quickly through a daara.





# A Day in the Life



The day of a talibé starts very early. They get up at about 5 am and go to the market to help the merchants set up their stall in return for a small amount of money. Afterwards they stay in the market to beg for money, rice, and sugar . They also go to beg in busy streets and intersections because it increases their chance of reaching their daily quota, however weaving in and out of traffic also increases their risk of severe injury. At about 10 am they return to the daara with what they have gotten. They cook the food and if they have got the amount of money they need they then give it to the marabout. They stay in the daara and learn their lesson for the day. The lesson is different for every boy. It is a passage from the Koran which they must memorize. Once they have memorized their passage they return to the market to beg for the rest of the money that they must give to the marabout and more food. At 5 p.m., if they have the money then they are set free. They are allowed to go where they want, during soccer season many boys try to sneak into the stadium to watch the soccer games. At about 9 p.m. they return to their daaras and go to sleep. The day of a talibé is dictated by their marabout so it varies from daara to daara. Some boys beg up to 10 hours a day. The amount of money that they must give to the marabout depends on their age. The younger talibé must give 100 CFA. Once they turn 7-8 they must give 300 CFA. The talibés who are 15 or older must give 500 CFA per day. In order to meet this requirement the older talibés often have jobs. The amount of money required is dictated by the marabout so it too varies from daara to daara.

# Injuries

The daily life of a talibé is very dangerous. They walk around the city barefoot and therefore often have injuries to their feet. More than 40% of talibés who were asked said that they didn't even have a pair of shoes. It is very common for them to have cuts due to garbage in the streets. The cuts become infected as dirt and garbage enter the wound. It is very hard to keep foot injuries clean even once they are bandaged because the boys walk around barefoot. This means that cuts take a long time to heal. They are also in danger of being hit by cars as they spend most of the time in the street. If a talibé is hit and breaks their leg the marabout will most probably not bring them to the hospital so they rely upon charities. They are also at a risk for many diseases. They are prone to skin diseases such as scabies and worms as they sleep on the ground and are very malnourished. Any diseases that are contagious and passed by touch quickly spread from boy to boy as they sleep very close together. They are also at a high risk for malaria because they sleep out in the open without bug nets.



# Running Away



Under such harsh conditions many boys choose to run away. Many things could spark this decision but one of the most common is the fear of being hurt or tortured. When a talibé runs away they often leave the part of the city where their daara is located to make it hard for the marabout to find them. They may also go to another city. When they are on the run they sleep in areas that are very populated and that are out in the open. This is because if they sleep in a secluded area they may be kidnapped and sold into slavery or worse. Once on the run they do not have very many options. Most stay in the city, sleeping on street corners until a charity finds them. When this happens they are given the option of returning home to their families or going back to their daaras. They are often reluctant to return to their families as their parents are the ones who gave them to the marabouts in the first place. However they are also reluctant to go back to the daaras as their marabout may beat them for running away. Both of these options are better than the alternative. The police sometimes do night runs and if a talibé is found then he is sent to jail without question. The prison is for men, women and children alike. In the end, most children choose to return home. The government or the organization checks up on them every once and a while to ensure that they are not forced to return to their marabout.

# Maison de La Gare; a Ray of Hope

La Maison de La Gare is a non-profit organization, apolitical and secular, founded in 2007 by ten Senegalese to help the talibés of St-Louis. They provide medical care, food, education, clothes, emotional help, lessons on hygiene, access to showers and hope to the boys living in this terrible situation. They help boys who have run away return to their families and investigate claims of child abuse. The most important thing that they do is provide a safe place for the talibés to come and just be kids for a while. They give them hope for a better future where their life is not spent begging for the person who is supposed to protect them.



# The Staff



Maison de La Gare is a local association that is run by 2 Senegalese men, Issa Kouyate and Alaji Gaye, with the help of many volunteers. The volunteers come from all over the world as well as Senegal itself. Some of these volunteers are university students who need to work for a charity as a part of their program. A lot of the older talibés also help out a lot at the center. They help organize and take care of the younger kids. There are also 2 teachers who teach a French class every night and a nurse who is there every second night to take care of sick or injured talibés.

# Medical Care



Living as a talibé can be very dangerous. Maison de La Gare takes care of talibés who are injured or sick. In order to do this they have built an infirmary and have a registered nurse that works every second day. This nurse is the one who gives the medication to the boys. In order to receive medical care the boys come to the center where the infirmary is built. A big problem with this system is that some of the boys are scared to come to the infirmary as they know that a treatment of their injury may hurt. Also, some of the marabouts do not allow their boys to come to the center. To remedy this problem center workers visit daaras. They walk around to the different daaras with first aid supplies and treat the boys on the spot. This way they get to see most of the boys.



# Education

Maison de La Gare places a strong emphasis on education. It is very important for the boys to be educated so that they can have a good future. Unfortunately a lot of the marabouts do not want their boys to be enrolled in formal school because that would take away from the time that they could be begging. This means that a lot of the boys have never been to school because most children are sent to the marabout at a very young age. Even if the marabout were to allow them to be enrolled in formal schooling they would be at a serious disadvantage. This is where Maison de la Gare comes in. They have an hour long French class taught every evening at the center. There are different levels of French offered so that each child can learn at their own pace. They also offer trade programs such as sewing for the older boys. This allows them to have marketable skills when they leave the daaras so that they can make enough money to live.



# The Garden



The garden is a very important part of the center. It helps the boys learn how to grow fruit and vegetables which is a skill that they can use later on in life. The garden is completely taken care of by the boys. They come in every day and water the plants. This helps them learn responsibility and patience. They watch the plants grow and then reap the fruit of their labors. Once the fruit and vegetables are fully grown they can harvest them and sell them in the market for a little extra money. The fact that they are the ones who profit from their hard work is important because it shows them that if you work hard in life you will be rewarded.



# What We Brought to Help



Before we left, the main focus was on the medication that we would be bringing with us. We thought that this would be very important because medication is very expensive and not as easily accessible in Africa. We brought a physician's travel pack from Health Partners International with us. Health Partners International is a not-for-profit organization that asks companies to donate medication to make physician travel packs. You must make a donation of about 575 Canadian dollars in order to receive a physicians travel pack. The value of the pack is much approximately 5000 Canadian dollars. Each pack provides 600 treatments. Maison de la Gare has a good relationship with Health Partners International. This is essential because it allows the continuing function of the infirmary at the center.

# What We Did in the Daaras

Once we arrived in Senegal, the focus of our trip shifted from the medicine to working with the boys. We spent our mornings in the daaras. We walked around to different daaras and met some marabouts. We also treated the boys for diseases like scabies. We cleaned and bandaged cuts. We also bandaged the leg of a boy who had a very bad burn that hadn't been treated for a couple of weeks because he was too afraid to ask for help. We gave out a traditional medicine that would prevent and cure malaria. We brought Tylenol to help with pain and eye drops to cure pink eye. We also treated boys who had worms under their skin.



# What We did at The Center



We spent our afternoons at the center. We happened to be in Senegal during the week of circumcision so I spent a lot of my time at the center entertaining the 30 boys that were circumcised. I stayed in the library with them and watched movies and read with them. I found it incredible because they preferred to read than watch the movie. They brought me so many books that I had a stack of books half a foot high on my lap. I also gave some of the boys Tylenol and helped take care of them. My aunt Karen helped take care of the boys who came to the infirmary with injuries and organized all the medicine we had brought.

# A Story of Hope

Now I have a message to pass on. It is a message from one of the marabouts that we met. It is a message of good will. Not all marabouts are the same, however they get painted with the same brush. This particular marabout did not choose this profession to make money. It was handed down to him by his father. He does not make his boys beg for money and he does not beat them. In fact, all he asks that they do is go to their “Maraines” houses to get the food that they leave out. He is always calm and willing to ask for help in order to improve the boys’ lives. He is letting his boys be enrolled in school and has taught them about the importance of good hygiene. He is really doing his best considering the situation. He has said that if the government were able to give him enough money to move all of the boys, then he would go back to the country. This would mean that the boys would be able to live with their families and only come to him for classes. I think that this message is important because it shows that in some cases the marabouts are also victims of the system.



# Something Truly Amazing

There is one thing that I noticed on this trip that will stick with me, no matter where I go. This thing is the amazing spirit of the boys. They live in a situation that we cannot even imagine. Everyday they face beatings, lack of food, injuries and diseases. In this situation many of us would give up hope, but they are the complete opposite of hopeless. They are filled with curiosity and a genuine willingness to learn. They are incredibly smart and creative. They find a way to be happy, which I found incredible considering that those of us who are fortunate enough to live in industrialized countries are so unhappy with everything. These boys gave me a gift, even if they didn't know it. I went to Senegal with the goal of discovering how I could help them, but I think that they helped me more than I was able to help them. They showed me that if they can be happy with so little, than I should be happy with everything I have. They showed me that it's not what you have that makes you happy but rather who you're with and your attitude towards the world. I will always be thankful for that. This experience has definitely changed for the better the way that I look at my life.





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Rod LeRoy, Issa Kouyate and  
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