

## The boys of Senegal – “*ba banene*” beggars or believers?

Empire des Enfants Center in Dakar, Senegal, tugged at a special place in my heart as soon as Madame Marie-Pierre, our ODU Professor and Senegalese native, introduced me and our ODU student group to them. It all began with a simple Facebook email that donations were welcome through a global village organization. Somehow, all of the television and media commercials about orphaned African children did not ever resonate with me up until this point. Why now? We would soon be traveling to Senegal and visiting the Empire des Enfants Center first-hand. I read about the many young boys who were housed by this unique organization. I also read about the hundreds of children beggars in the streets who were forced to beg for their educational masters. Supposedly learning humility and the Quran, this school system has become dysfunctional. Not unlike many other systems in other countries, it is broken. Many Marabout religious leaders are fair and manage their pupils in an appropriate and humane way. Others starve and abuse the children, as young as four years old, particularly if they do not bring in daily alms in their orange buckets. Their living conditions are deplorable, unsanitary, with no human touch and little rest. Their impoverished families are well-intentioned relatives and based on long-held religious and cultural beliefs, they trust the system and send their boys for religious training. It used to be different, but has this school system, once a respected concept, evolved into a corrupt and complex symbol of a social infrastructure crumbling and decayed from within? This is what Empire des Enfants is all about. It provides one solution to this disturbing question.

Schooling is essential for the future of the country as well as personal reasons. Muslim religious education is not questioned. Humility is certainly an undisputed virtue that we all need to learn. Alternatives to poverty are always found by societies out of desperation but ones that rape the future men of a country – rape them of humanness, kindness, caring, love, peace, honesty, hope and education, not to mention food and water, need to be addressed and addressed immediately. It reminded me, in the same way, many years ago, of how the Senegalese were enticed to quarrel among themselves, captured and separated from their families and sold as slaves, through the door of no return. An intervention is needed to break this cycle of slow, dehumanization of boys, through a door of no return. Is it appropriate for a Western, Christian woman to judge this cultural and religious norm? No. Empire des Enfants has already recognized and provides a tiny ray of hope for the children to believe that we believe in them. Senegalese want to fix their own problems and Empire des Enfants could be setup to enable others to help the Senegalese fix their own educational system.

I did not know if I could emotionally cope with the many child beggars in the streets whom we were told we would come across. We were taught to say, “*ba banene*” which is “see you later” or “(maybe later or I may donate to you later)” in the native Wolof language. It just did not seem to be enough for me. So, to be able to cope, I justified donating to the L’Empire ahead of our trip along with soliciting our church, St. Simon’s and my family for donations. I trust that the money will help the

organization be a safe haven for the boys and subsidize a bit until the Center could return them safely to their families. What a simple solution. Two weeks after my visit, it just does not seem to be enough. Yes, we will help them with their website, maybe produce a video, and we have plans for a soccer ball campaign that will enable soccer balls to be sent to the Center. "Futbal" is a unique way to break the ice with newcomers to the Center and an easy and fun way to connect with the children. Still, the tugging at my heart continues and it is not enough. Girard, the spokesperson for Empire des Enfants and the 'rock' who spoke English and could communicate the Center's , mentioned funds for a van that could transport at least 6 boys to school. Right now, they cannot afford to send them to school nor transport them.

I can clearly see the boy's innocent faces, a bit hesitant around us initially, but quickly warmed up to us. The residents were genuinely happy and the staff was joyful that we shared some time with them. The boy's artistic work was displayed on one large concrete wall, and we purchased a few works of art. Beds are scarce and 2 or 3 boys need to share a single bed. Clothes hang on the clothesline and are tattered and look like hand me downs from far away. Many go without shoes, but that is not a priority in this hot climate. One boy sits and reads a book, in French, of course, amid the majority of boys who nosily play with a recently donated table game. Primary colors in painted murals shout positivity on the four major walls that are visible from every vantage point, brightening the drab surroundings.

One striking point is that the Center has its nooks and crannies yet most of the entire space can be quickly scanned at any one time – from the brightly blue painted steps to a large stage. It makes the visitor ask: what type of space do young boys really need? The center is symbolic – it is an open, roofless space that both serves as a basketball court, a soccer field, a living room and a place to hang clothes to dry. Community life is the central theme here with little furniture needed. No hiding here. The Senegalese sun beams on decorative, plastic circular mobiles in blue and green colors hanging from overhead shading where wooden benches serve as a dining area and a small reception area, also open. A clever way to recycle old plastic soda bottles by cutting them from top to bottom in a circular motion that warms up the space to be more play-like. The only divided space is the bedroom upstairs. Decorations, as appropriate, are made by the children in arts and crafts. What other Center displays would one need? Clean but sparse, the boys look well cared for and safe. We are told that the word has spread and now, boys come to the Center of their own choosing, and not just escorted by the J'an Darne.

It is undisputable that the new Senegalese President, Macky Sall, has quite a full agenda and numerous priorities. We are excited and hopeful that he will be an honest politician and lead the Senegalese people to improved standards of living, employment, and focus on fixing the educational system, particularly on this situation. Thus, the term "ba banene" is hopefully not the message we will be sending the boys of Senegal whether they must beg to survive or not. The boys of

Senegal deserve to be fed, to be educated, to learn about their religion, and to be children.

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