

PRECIOUS TO SENEGAL

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" - Mary Oliver



Where are you?

"I arrived in Senegal in the middle of night. I remember the heat and the dozens of people crowding around the airport exit, they all had their own agendas: some were picking up their friends, some were begging for money and some were just there to ogle at the various people coming from fascinating places.

It felt so unreal. The day I'd be working so hard for had finally arrived. I was no longer an English teenager in sixth-form, I was now in Senegal as a full-time teacher. I was both excited and frightened for what I was about to experience.

I arrived at my project two days later. I had been told a lot about what to expect, but as anyone would when they arrive in a place completely foreign to what they know, I was in disbelief. I remember the travel guides' descriptions not being very appetizing: 'Senegal's biggest junction town is made of dust, sweaty lines of traffic and a huge garbage problem', 'Kaolack isn't a town to live the good life' and 'its water is almost undrinkable' were only a few.

Although I am of West-African decent, I still could not picture

my project properly in my head before I arrived. Nothing could compare to the moment I was first greeted by the dusty roads, beaten by the sweltering heat and welcomed into the cement houses of Kaolack. It was a long and worthwhile wait. I loved Kaolack the moment I arrived and I still can't imagine being anywhere else!"



What are you doing there?

"Working in Diapalante, Senegal, has been an exciting and rewarding experience. Our community centre attracts many people, from the very young to the very old, all with varying abilities.

My partner and I work from 11am to 9pm, teaching IT and English with the aid of our project host and supervisor, Master P.

We follow a very flexible syl-

labus to ensure that the members that go to school learn what will benefit them in class, while also having both conventional and interesting topics for the members who are not at

school .

I often look at extracts from books, news-

papers and poems with my intermediate students to spark up interesting discussions in English.

I feel like my students enjoy my lessons. It's good to keep things interesting or they'll lose the enthusiasm they have for English "

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What do you like about your project?

What I admire the most about working in a community centre is being able to see the effects within the community. Your students become your friends and your family. They will be the people you pass on the street, who you have lunch with and who you will celebrate the many Senegalese religious holidays with. You do not only see their English improve, but you experience it. When someone who once could not even say hello, can now have a short conversation in English with you, you cannot help but feel a

strong sense of achievement.

Diapalante is a drop-in centre so people come whenever they are free. It enables people in the community to work around their busy schedules; some people have to work at the market to feed their families or go to school.

By not having set times, we ensure that everybody has the opportunity to learn. At first, this seemed very challenging, but somehow we have managed to ensure that everyone who comes in is taught in some way."



Our host sister Fatou Ba!

What do you plan to do with the rest of your year?

"I'm currently working on opening a library here. It should be open by June. We've got the space and quite a few books. We are just waiting for more donations and working on publicity. I am in charge of the Literacy Committee in the centre. It's just a small group of teachers, students and I who work towards ensuring the people within the community can read and write.

I've been teaching members the importance of dictionaries and encouraging them to read in both English and French. They're slowly coming to grips with how borrowing books work. They don't get the opportunity to read many books in the community so this will really help them.

Malaria is also a problem here; many people become sick. I noticed that many people do not use their mosquito nets or cover up at night, simple things

that could help to reduce their chances of getting malaria. I spoke to both our host and the person who set up the centre about it and now we are working towards World Malaria Day. It's all about making them aware of what they could do to avoid malaria without being patronising. They know the facts, but we need to get them to actually put it into practice. I believe that even if one person starts to use their mosquito net at night rather than leaving it in a knot over their bed, I have made a difference. I do hope to do a little more than that though.

I want to use what I am interested in a little more. I will be studying History of Art at university. I use

art during my lessons with the kids, but I think it's time to get the adults involved. I've come across some great lesson plans that teach language and culture through art. I hope to experiment with a few of them."



A colourful tree in Foundgione, Senegal. Art is a very unique thing in Senegal. They enjoy painting trees in interesting ways.

What have you done outside of teaching English and IT?

"In the centre, we celebrate a variety of International Days and make our own special occasions based around something significant that has happened around that time. My favourites so far have been World Aids Days and Nelson Mandela Week. I think they were both very successful.

World Aids Day had a varied amount of activities. The morn-

ing was all about finding out what they know and getting people to create posters for the performance in the afternoon. After lunch, we had a drama group perform a play on how to avoid AIDS and the variety of ways you can get it. After this, everyone over the age of sixteen stayed behind for a

talk with professionals. Our students

were very engaged. This was one of the first times I had seen my students so quiet and all participating fully. It was a great feeling.

Nelson Mandela Week was something we made up after hearing about his death. It was all about black history and looking at Mandela's life. I was surprised at how little they knew of black history. This is something I have tried to incorporate into more lessons ever since."

"This was one of the first times I had seen my students so quiet"

How have you benefited from your project?

"I have learnt a lot from volunteering in Senegal. One thing I have learnt is how to be independent. Not being around my friends or being able to easily contact them has forced me to make important decisions on my own. I think I'll go back being able to think for myself a little more rather than allowing people to make my decisions for me.

My time management has improved. Every second is important here. You never know what is going to happen tomorrow so procrastinating is never good in Senegal. It's really best to do things straight away. That's something I really hope to take back with me. It's

a very good quality to have along with patience and endurance. When you plan a computer lesson and the electricity is cut 20 minutes into it, you need to just let it go and move on with things.

I've also learnt to handle uncomfortable or confusing situations. Being in a place with a completely different culture to your own is never easy, but it is so rewarding. Every day is a learning curve. If you hear or see something you don't understand, it's best to ask questions and learn from it. The more you understand of the life of the people here, the more accepting of you they will be."



About Precious In Senegal

I am a volunteer in Senegal. I am volunteering in Senegal for eleven months. I am currently half way through my time here.

E-mail: Precious_Adesina@hotmail.co.uk



itsjustprecious.blogspot.com



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Volunteering has been a unique and transforming experience. I have come to realise many things about myself. These have been things I do not think I would have realised while I was in England. I have definitely grown as a person in the first half of my year and I hope the second half will do the same.

The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Precious In Senegal

Senegal:

Diapalante Senegal, B.P.
2190,
Touba Ndong,
Kaolack,
Senegal

Phone:

00221781617710

England:

24 Monmouth Road,
Essex,
RM9 5DH

Phone:

+447846013066

Email:

Precious_Adesina@hotmail.co.uk



Above: My hosts wedding. Below: My surprise party!

