

Fishtown Resident Goes Global

A local Fishtown resident, Shonta D. Collins, RN, BSN, MPA, founded a Non-Profit organization called Explorers Sans Frontières (ESF) from her home on Almond Street. ESF is a grass roots organization seeking to support college students and emerging leaders, including professionals to develop independent research, travel to countries in development, support humanitarian efforts and participate in cultural exchanges with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. ESF hosts health fairs, workshops and clinics; conducts medical screenings and health education both locally and globally. ESF Student Leaders are local Philadelphia college students who might not otherwise have an opportunity to travel abroad and do humanitarian work that impacts a generation of people! ESF is

a 501 (c)(3) organization under the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition (GPUAC). Ms. Collins decided to



Shonta D. Collins, Founder and President of Explorers Sans Frontières (ESF).

change her course in life by becoming a RN after years of working at academic institutions and corporate law firms. At the present time, Ms. Collins

works full-time for both the University of Pennsylvania Health System in critical care and for ESF, where she does not receive a salary for her full-time dedication to serving the people in Philadelphia and abroad. A large portion of her salary from working as a Nurse is given to ESF Student Leaders as stipends to offset the costs of their international experience. ESF is a grass roots organization in search of a place to call home. At the present time, ESF's office is at Ms. Collins' basement and is very overcrowded with ESF donations, educational materials and supplies for the community health fairs and the list continues. The organization has a small budget and has applied for grants but the money would go to programming instead of capital expenses, which means that the organization is unable to grow to its full potential.

ESF recently concluded its humanitarian trip to Senegal, West Africa during the months of May-June 2008 which included ESF Student Leaders from LaSalle University, Chiara deLeon, Christina Spino and Tri Huynh along with ESF Member Lara Lechtenberg. ESF's humanitarian trip to Senegal was filled with many emotional challenges. They found themselves struggling with the utter realities of human suffering, inadequate distribution of wealth and resources as well as the smiling faces of the Senegalese people. Often times they pondered on how to best share their experience with the world and for the world to take action and make a difference in the life of another human being. According to ESF Student Leader, Chiara deLeon, a LaSalle University student, "The greatest benefit from the ESF experience is the personal journey: I went through an understanding of how people live, the help they need, that I can help them, and what kind

of humanitarian I am. I realized that I need to reconnect with that outlook and just enjoy my blessing."

ESF's first volunteer experience was in local public hospital, l'Hôpital Régional de Thiès, a hospital generally filled with the poorest of the poor. After a meeting with the administration, who typed impressively on brand new computers in air-conditioned offices, the group toured the hospital. They talked and joked in French and remedial Wolof, the native dialect spoken in Senegal, as best they could with patients who suffered on bare mattresses crowded into rooms with no ventilation other than an open window, often with little or no medication besides the sodium chloride (salt), saline (water), or glucose (sugar), given through an IV (in the vein). Most patients nonsensically received such medications upon admission regardless of their diagnosis. Moreover, most patients were often misdiagnosed; the hospital lacked

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Paint it Blue

There is a "Blue Ribbon" community to show support for the Philadelphia Police Department.

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the resources as did the patients having the inability to pay. The patients sat in humid, close quarters within the hospital for weeks at a time with no plans for discharge but continues to be charged fees for their stay with no end result in their care or diagnosis of their medical problem.

Often, most children were suffering not just from the effects of malaria but Hepatitis B, Cirrhosis of the liver or even cancer because of the lack of availability for immunizations, malnutrition, pre-maturity, HIV/AIDS, and the list goes on. What was shocking, however, were the medication the hospital used to treat malaria, Chloroquine, an anti-malarial that has lost efficacy in many areas of the world, and which carries a WARNING against its ineffective use in Africa on the US government's CDC website. After alerting the Head Nurse to this fact, ESF Member from East Falls and graduate of George Washington University, Lara Lechtenberg, received the simple response, "No, no, it's ok, it works." This response was most likely based not on medical ignorance, but on the fact that the hospital has to make do with whatever supplies it can obtain, whether bought cheap or donated from pharmaceuticals or from other countries (it was interesting and heartening, the volunteers note, to see ambulances with Italian and Spanish writing, donated from their European counterparts).

The volunteers had slightly different experiences at Le Centre Médico Social Barthimée and l'Hôpital Catholique de Saint Jean de Dieu. Although both were private healthcare centers and though they received no government funds, existing solely on donations, they had significantly more resources than the public hospital, including volunteers and employees from abroad. At Barthimée, the volunteers met a Temple University Doctor spending a year of her residency at the hospital; L'Hôpital Catholique de Saint Jean de Dieu was full of Nurse-Nuns from Spain and receives much funding from the Catholic Church in addition to donations from its sister churches in California and New Jersey. Both hospitals also employed fantastic Doctors, Nurses, and Technicians from all over Africa. Although money is still very tight, their reliance on donations and other "soft" money means the rug can be pulled out from under them at any minute. It's for this reason that Explorers Sans Frontiers (ESF) plans to continue its fundraising not only for the most needful in the public hospital, but also the more efficient and effective private hospitals.

Besides the hospitals, ESF spent time in two schools, one a school for the blind, the other a local public middle school that taught English. Both have significant needs for the smallest things—tactile and sensory toys the blind children can enjoy, eyeglasses for those who are not actually blind but whose vision is too poor, mostly related to cataract

which is secondary to Vitamin A deficiency, pencils, notebooks, and, as emphasized by the principal of the public school, English books. All the children's fiction, nonfiction, and schoolbooks that simply sit unread on American shelves year after year—these are what these kids need more than anything. After seeing the school's circa-1980's computer lab, ESF is determined to collect donated laptops in the US to be sent to the school—the defeat is not nearly as difficult as raising the money to ship them.

In summary, ESF would like to continue to call Fishtown, "home," and have office space to see community members requiring nursing care, health screenings and referral services. ESF has partnered to help a large population of immigrants, refugees and asylees and has partaken in several health fairs, educational workshops and social events to raise awareness to the desperate needs of our global community. ESF started only 9 months ago but has a promising future to continue to do their part in the community, both locally and globally.

If you would like more information or to donate to Explorers Sans Frontières (ESF) please check out their site at www.ExplorersSF.org and videos from Senegal at www.YouTube.com/ExplorersSF. You may also email them at Info@ExplorersSF.org or call 215-219-9588 for more information or to make a contribution. ESF would also like friendly emails about their outreach in the local community and abroad. ESF is a local and global humanitarian organization, serving a large majority of the underserved populations. ESF has two upcoming social fundraising events at Bistro Romano in Society Hill on October 9 from 5:30-9:30 pm and XIX at the Park Hyatt in Center City on November 15 from 7-11 pm. A silent auction with donations from Termini Di Aroma in Old City, XIX restaurant gift certificate, and much more!•