Bringing Care to South Africa

The 2nd in a series about two young women from East Falls who spent summer 2008 with Explorers Sans Frontières in West Africa

by Lara Lechtenberg

First Stop: A Senegalese Hospital

Our first volunteer experience in Senegal was in local public hospital, l'Hôpital Régional de Thiès, a place filled with the poor and poorer. Walking through crowded outdoor waiting areas, we met suffering patients on bare and dirty mattresses stuffed into rooms with no ventilation other than an open window, often with little or no medication aside from saline or glucose IVs.

In the crowded pediatric ward, I asked the head nurse why most of the children were ill. His response was not surprising: "Le paludisme,"—malaria. Many of the kids' conditions— malaria, Hep B, tuberculosis, blindness— are caused by lack of immunizations, rampant malnutrition, and lack of preventative information. What we found most surprising was the medication the hospital used to treat malaria: Chloroquine, an anti-malarial that no longer works in many countries, and which carries a warning against its use in Africa on the CDC website. After asking the head nurse about the inefficacy of their frontline defense against this major cause of infant and child mortality, I received the simple response, "No, no, ça va,"— it's ok, it works. His answer was not based on medical ignorance, but on the fact that the hospital has to make do with whatever supplies it can obtain, sometimes donated from pharmaceutical companies or other countries.

Lara and Christina Spino, showing Abdoullaye, an 11-year-old with liver cancer, how to use our digital cameras.

Returning home, we found not only a profound appreciation for all that we have in America, but also a sense of responsibility to help those whose circumstances have not yet enabled them to help themselves. Times are hard for everyone, but watching a child, or any patient, experience unnecessary pain and suffering is a completely different type of economic tragedy. All we ask for is some help so that we can help others.

To fund our projects in Philadelphia and abroad, Explorers Sans Frontières (ESF) hosts social events each month in various bars and restaurants. In October, volunteers and ESF leaders participated in a social fundraiser at Bistro Romano, in Headhouse Square. Fundraising can be difficult these days, but we really made strides in expanding our organization to a new group of students, volunteers, and supporters for this year's trip to Thiès, Senegal.

Before inviting anyone to our next event, however, we want to make sure everyone knows where their hard-earned $15 will go. We know it's difficult now for many to find a few spare dollars for people they'll never meet, in a country they'll likely never visit. But after our trip to Senegal this past summer, we can't quit trying.

ESF's next event will be held on November 15, from 7 - 11pm, at XIX, the Park Hyatt Philadelphia at the Bellevue, 19th Fl, 200 Broad St. A $15 donation will support ESF's humanitarian projects, while silent auctions will feature dinner for 2 at XIX. Please come out to support Explorers Sans Frontières!