

The Camel Express



Newsletter of the Friends of Niger

Volume 24 Issue 1



April 2009

Peace Corps Friendship From 1970 Blossoms USA Study Opportunity for Nigerien "Nephew"



John Baird as a PCV in Niger with Mourtallah's parents.

Today a young African man is studying at Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois as a result of the cross cultural friendship that began 38 years ago when John Baird, piano technician of Decatur, Illinois, served in the Peace Corps. That young man is Mourtallah Idy Gondah, 27, who comes from Niger, West Africa where Baird served for three years in the early 1970's. During this time, Baird developed a close friendship with Mourtallah's father, Idy Gondah, who was his Nigerien counterpart in the village where they lived. They managed the peanut cooperative.

"Despite the striking differences between our two cultures, Idy and I had similar interests, personalities and values," recalls Baird. "We spent a lot of time together on the job, and I ate every evening meal at their house. Mourtallah's mother cooked my food for a whole year!" The relationship between the two became like that of brothers (consequently, these days Mourtallah always refers to John Baird as "Uncle.")

first, the idea seemed too farfetched to consider. More than a year passed before inspiration hit, and John realized he was uniquely qualified to help make these dreams become reality. Soon, John and his wife Jan found themselves in careful visa discussions with the American Embassy in Niamey, since applications are denied at a high rate. Against long odds, Mourtallah arrived at O'Hare International Airport on December 21, 2007.

John never imagined that 36 years later Idy would ask if his scholarly son could come to the United States to study. At

Mourtallah now has a one-year track record behind him. After an intense semester and summer of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, Mourtallah was able to jump into regular classes along with American students. This fall he did very well in Calculus, Chemistry, and English 101. Next semester he will add Physics and Engineering Graphics. Now that Mourtallah has shown himself to be a viable student, his future is opening up before him, full of promise. One year of study could grow into four, but this will require additional funding. Mourtallah would like to pursue a Civil Engineering degree to help build Niger's infrastructure. His country needs him.



Mourtallah with Lincoln.



Mourtallah at Parkland College

(Continued on page 3).



Dear Friends of Niger,

We are very encouraged by the news we receive from our members. We constantly hear human interest stories of how Niger RPCVs continue to make a difference and fulfill the third goal of Peace Corps. In this edition of the Camel Express, we want to share with you the story of John Baird and his family, and how they reached out to John's Nigerien host family and the son of John's counterpart in Niger. The relationship between two families, thousands of miles apart, has grown and evolved since John served in Niger in the early 1970s. This issue also announces Bill Stein's efforts to promote a Peace Corps Volunteer Museum. A Niger RPCV and former member of the Friends of Niger Board of Directors, Bill has been instrumental for the past several years in assembling and establishing a meaningful exhibition of artifacts and experiences of Peace Corps Volunteers who served from Oregon and the Northwest. We also want you to know about the work and efforts of some of our FON members who were not Peace Corps Volunteers but who either served in Niger in other capacities or who committed themselves to promoting a continued friendship after a tourist experience with Nigeriens. One of these people is Bess Palmisciano. We've included Bess's story about an NGO, Rain for the Sahel and the Sahara, that she started in northern Niger. Rain (as it is affectionately referred to) supports education and other community development programs in Niger.

By reading these human interest stories and vignettes along with similar stories of other FON members in past editions of the Camel Express, we hope that you will be inspired to write your story and send it to us. We would like to capture as many of your Niger stories both past and present as possible. Your stories and experiences are what encourages new PCVs and what sparks the memory of others to reconnect with friends from long ago. Photos are welcome.

Also in this edition of the Camel Express, we want to introduce to you a new FON partner AAWEL. This Nigerien NGO works especially with children who need some extra educational support. AAWEL's program, called "Second Chance Schools" is the first partnership project between FON and AAWEL. We look forward to reading more about AAWEL's experiences in future edition of the Camel Express.

We hope that you enjoy this edition, and that we will hear from you soon.

John

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The Camel Express is the periodical
newsletter of **Friends of Niger**
(FON).

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this newsletter in FULL COLOR at:

www.friendsofniger.org

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Please send address changes and
corrections, as well as any queries to
The Camel Express at the address
above.



African Nephew Studies in U.S. (cont'd from page 1)

Mourtallah with other international students.

You Can Help!

Niger is a friendly place for Americans. Today, after 45 years of uninterrupted Peace Corps presence in the country, many officials in the democratically-elected government have fond memories of volunteers helping in their villages or teaching in their schools.

Tuition is \$6,143; a physics book \$93. The Bairds have paid most of the first year's expenses, and need help. Mourtallah requires additional support of about \$154,000 to finish his degree and to realize his dream. If you would like to help, here's how.

Tax Deductible Donations, large and small, can be made to a mission project set up to support African students (see www.cccdisciples.org). Checks should be made out to Central Christian Church with "**Scholarship—African Peace Corps Affiliates**" (or just "**SAPCA**") written on the Memo line, and sent to 650 W William St, Decatur IL 62522 . A letter acknowledging the gift will be sent for tax purposes. Donations do not support the operation of any religious organization, and there is no connection with the national Peace Corps program. Alternately, you can give through the PayPal Donate buttons on the church's or the MySpace and FaceBook websites. These scholarships are set up to support any African student with a Peace Corps affiliation. Mourtallah is our first recipient. Our heartfelt thanks for each and every donation.

READ MORE OF THE STORY !

www.myspace.com/mourtallahsstory and on FaceBook

CONTACT US:

John Baird, 76 N Country Club Rd, Decatur IL 62521

Email: ScholarshipAfricanPeaceCorps@yahoo.com

Direct donations are welcome, but are not tax deductible.



Above: Mourtallah & John Baird on frozen Lake Decatur.

Left: Jan Baird (Mum) and Mourtallah study English.

Rain for the Sahel and the Sahara Expands Aid to Other Regions of Niger

By Bess Plamisciano

Bess Palmisciano, an American lawyer, first met the Tuareg when she traveled as a tourist to Niger in 2000. She was impressed with their independence, hospitality, and hopes for their children, including education. She founded RAIN, which currently provides school supplies to 1,000 students, while about 250 volunteer parents tutor students, manage gardens, teach children about health and raise funds for schools through community businesses. RAIN also helps with AIDS education programs and women's artisan cooperatives. She submitted this article to FON.

Rain for the Sahel and Sahara (RAIN) has been known as an organization of the Air Massif. But RAIN is growing – working with Wodaabe as well as Tuareg people and expanding its geographic reach to Ingal, Tchén Tabaraden, Tchirozène, Aderbissinant and, most recently, Tilabéri. We are producing and selling beautiful embroidered products made by the Wodaabe women of Metier Chance Vivre (MCV), a new cooperative at Foudouk Amelteltal. As with all RAIN cooperatives, the women donate fifty percent of their earnings to a fund for their school.

RAIN set off to Ingui and its school, arriving unannounced to find about 15 fathers building a classroom with straw mats hung on a wood frame. Every year they take down what's left of last year's straw classroom and make a new one. This year they will repair the desks and chairs that are broken down after many years of use. This small village has 160 students in its school, many of whom walk up to 20 kilometers each way, every day, to attend classes. The people of Ingui are herders. They are lucky to live near a shallow lake and they find a few fish there, but food is scarce and they'd love to have a school garden, but without a fence the goats eat all the crops. RAIN is now providing the materials for a fence, along with a pump and drip irrigation systems. We've also promised to provide a roof, doors and windows when the community finishes constructing two new classrooms. From our hub in Ingui we'll establish school market gardens, introduce mothers to education through our mentoring program, and develop community businesses to support schools. Take a look at our video, *From A Deep Well*, by linking through our Web site or searching on YouTube.

School Director, President of Parent Committee, and Village Chief



Detail from Placemat



Camel Pillow Cover



RAIN continued

MCV products include pillow covers, placemats with table runners and napkins and tee shirts in a variety of designs and colors. All proceeds of sale go to the women, who put aside 50% to support their children's school. Contact RAIN at liz@rain4sahara.org or by phone at 603-371-0676 for more information or to place an order.



Parents building hangar



Tee Shirt



School Children

NEW FRIENDS OF NIGER T-SHIRTS



Lisa Krusa-McLaren, a talented graphic designer and daughter of a Niger III Peace Corps

Volunteer, designed and donated this lovely T-shirt logo to FON. They are best quality shirts with silk screen colors that won't fade. This first run is being offered at \$15 including postage. They are available in beige, which would have the design as 3-colors, or brown which would mean the 2-color design would be on a brown shirt background. To order yours, send your size (S, M, L, XL) and \$15 to FON at the address on the ORDER FORM (p. 7).

50th Anniversary Museum Exhibition Announcement

Bill Stein, a Niger RPCV who used to serve on the FON board and who is one of the original members of the board for the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience has sent the following announcement:

Friends,

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Committee for a Museum of the Peace Corps Experience has entered into a collaborative effort with the Oregon Historical Society to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps in 2011. Together, CMPCE and OHS will be putting on an exhibit that will highlight the contributions of Oregon and Northwest Peace Corps volunteers to the history and success of this great program. The show is scheduled to run from January to April of 2011.

Oregon and other northwest states have consistently been in the top ten of producers of volunteers. We also boast one of the largest and most active of the returned volunteer communities. Recognizing the significance of these facts, the Oregon Historical Society was persuaded to host our 50th Anniversary exhibit.

This is an exciting opportunity and one that will bring a great deal of recognition to Peace Corps, to Portland and all the RPCVs that reside here. Peace Corps is planning a nationwide series of commemorative anniversary events and we in Portland are thrilled to be part of such a major undertaking. As we go forward with the planning for this program, we will need your help. In 2009 we will publicize specific requests for help with preparing exhibits, collection of items to exhibit (either donated or loaned), oral history recordings, research into Oregon's and the Pacific Northwest's contributions to Peace Corps and for your participation in various educational programs to be held at the museum. Finally, an undertaking of this magnitude is very expensive and your financial support is essential.

Please think about how you can get involved. We need your input and look forward to working with you.

www.museumofthepeacecorpsexperience.org

PCMUSEUM@COMCAST.NET PHONE 503-699-9833

AAWEL Thanks FON for Its Contribution

In December, 2008, FON gave AAWEL a grant of \$2000 to help implement its Second Chance Schools and the Deaf School in Niamey. The schools offer hope to children who have dropped out of school by teaching life skills and a vocational and leadership curriculum. This year four of the schools are beginning by revitalizing their gardening plots and two will start poultry projects. The Deaf School will do both. The projects are selected using a participatory approach, and the profits are used for secondary projects such as sewing and carpentry. They have partnerships with other schools to train teachers in the curriculum. A more detailed report will appear in the August issue of the Camel Express.



**LEFT: Partnership AAWEL and The Deaf School of Niamey: Project Funded by AAWEL and Friends of Niger (FON).
RIGHT: Classroom observation in a Second Chance School.**



FRIENDS OF NIGER 2009 MEMBERSHIP & ORDER FORM

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City/ State _____ Phone (h) _____

Zip _____ Phone (w) _____

E- Mail Address _____

Connection to Niger (RPCV, etc.) _____

Dates in Niger _____ Location in Niger _____

Program or Involvement in Niger _____

*Membership Dues & Contributions Help Fund **FON** Activities - including **The Camel Express**,
the **FON website**, the **FON Archives**, and **Projects** such as Those Listed Below.*

**The Friends of Niger is a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3).
Membership and contributions to Friends of Niger are fully tax deductible.**

Please Check Appropriate Boxes

- ☐ Enclosed is \$20 for an Individual Membership in FON
☐ \$55 to cover Individual Membership in both FON & NPCA
☐ Enclosed is \$35 for a FON Family Membership (2 Members at One Address)
☐ I am a current Niger PCV, entitled to Free Membership
☐ I am a New RPCV, entitled to a 1-Year Free Membership

New and renewing members are entitled to one FREE copy of *Brother from Niger*

Format Choice: DVD _____ VHS _____ No Thanks _____

- ☐ In Addition to my Membership, I have enclosed
a General Contribution of _____
- ☐ Instead of Joining FON at this time, I have enclosed
a General Contribution of _____
- ☐ I want to support FON's Young Girls' Scholarship Program (YGSP) activities with
a Contribution of _____
- ☐ I want to support FON's Microcredit in Niger activities with
a Contribution of _____
- ☐ I want to support FON's Youth Education activities through a NEW PARTNER, AAWEL
with a Contribution of _____
- ☐ I want to support the FON Chewable Vitamin Campaign
with a Contribution of _____
- ☐ Please send _____ copies of Brother from Niger/DVD
Format Choice: DVD _____ VHS _____
at \$20 (2 for \$35) (Shipping Included) _____
- ☐ Please send _____ Friends of Niger T-Shirts
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T-Shirt Sizes: S _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED _____

Make Check or Money Order Payable to Friends of Niger and mail with this form to:
P. O. Box 5823, Washington, D. C. 20016-9998



FON Participation Menu

Indicate your interest with a check mark. Or add something new at the bottom. Tell us how to reach you on Page 11.

- ☐ Will help set up local FON group
- ☐ Would participate in local FON group
- ☐ Will be local FON contact person
- ☐ Would be FON contact person for potential PCVs to Niger (contact us at the address on page 11 or via e-mail at j.soloninka@sbcglobal.net)

Other _____

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An electronic FULL COLOR version of this newsletter and previous editions can be accessed at <http://www.friendsofniger.org>



Friends of Niger

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Address Correction Requested



**There is no way to peace.
Peace is the way.**