

ASSOCIATION



Niger Zinder, March 2020

2009 - 2019 The charity evening on December 3, 2019 at the CO2 in La Tour-de-Trême with the fabulous comedians YANN LAMBIEL & MARC DONNET-MONAY and our wonderful ambassador Anne Carrard!



The Ambassador to Niger in Geneva and our dynamic Sponsor-journalist, J.-Philippe Rapp!

The charity evening in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Association *Au Coeur du Niger* was one of intensity and happiness!

THANK YOU to all the beautiful people who participated, who contributed to this great success, and who put joy, heart and laughter into the whole evening. We enjoyed a screening of the 3rd documentary film by Jean-Philippe Rapp and Ian Jaquier entitled, *Isabelle's Dream - A Future for Children in Niger*; with the second part of the evening animated by the magical duo Yann Lambiel and Marc Donnet-Monay, who made us laugh out loud with the latest performance of their show *NOUS!*

Thank you for the beautiful moments shared during the evening in Gruyère!



Smiles and love at the *Après-demain* Centre in Niger!

After the snow and cold winter in Switzerland, I sweltered under Zinder's burning 52° sun! I was bathed in happiness and warmth at the *Après-demain* Centre, surrounded by 330 orphan children, albinos and young girls! February and March were creative, supportive and constructive. The new dormitory for the older boys (CM2 and college level) was constructed during that time, and the final touches (including two essential fans) and painting were completed before it was time for the boys to choose a personal space, each equipped with a military mat and mattress!

Our two precious and efficient technical helpers from Switzerland came back to the Centre to help in the construction of a large kindergarten room, and an extension to the infirmary. With a great deal of muscle and sweat, Frédéric and Bertrand helped break down the walls of the

infirmary, which is being enlarged to include a comprehensive area for sick and convalescent pupils and young girls.

They also managed to convince me (I still don't know how) to remove a dividing wall in order to create a passage to the construction site of the new kindergarten. Our more than 40 little ones, aged between three and five years, were too cramped in the existing premises. The majority of these children are part of the second generation of girls I took in 10 years ago! I hope that a love for learning will grow inside them from a very young age!

We had to pay attention to the septic tanks surrounding this new building. Pipes were moved and foundations were dug. To date, the cement walls - bricks made on site by local workers - have been completed, and we are waiting to buy materials for the roof. Because of this extraordinary health crisis due to the coronavirus, all land borders of Niger and airports have been closed. Prices are surging - especially food and basic necessities for the population, who already suffer extensively under normal conditions - and it will become increasingly difficult to find quality materials with which to complete the work. But we will manage! If inflation prevention measures are not taken, prices will increase from 4.4% to 7.9%.



The kindergarten room under construction – March 2020

We all returned to Switzerland for the lockdown, just before the Niamey and Zinder airports closed. We would not have lacked for things to do had we stayed in Zinder, there is so much to develop and set up for all these children; and there is no shortage of sandy space. We were able to revisit the two plots of land (10'000m² and 15'000m²) and I was already dreaming of my Professional Training Centre and a huge plot of land dedicated to crops and fruit trees!



The Centre bubbles with joy over new slides!

Three slides are being manufactured and delivered to the Centre to the delight of the children! We needed three of them to satisfy the children's passion for fun. They are built to last and cemented to the ground, to withstand hardcore outdoor play!

The generous Montreux Basketball Club was kind enough to offer two basketball hoops for the students of the Centre, after having donated a good quantity of basketballs over the last few years. The athletic field is becoming a reality, and the sports are increasing in skill and daring! The dynamic Fribourg Olympic Basket donated huge bags filled with stuffed toys, to the great delight of the children! What sweet dreams and sweet nights ahead for young and old.

The children asked repeatedly for equipment to use in their dusty, unending soccer games. Each to his own team, the scores were close and everyone put their heart and legs into the game. With new goals and the field levelled with sand vans, the boys couldn't get enough soccer, even under 40° at the end of the day!

The Centre's first diplomas in sewing

The girls in sewing school took practical and oral exams at the end of 2019, under the supervision of Zinder's vocational training officers. The first sewing diplomas were awarded this March to the Association girls who passed their exams with success, and it was a majority! The best results were achieved by Djamilia, Rayana and Maâmoura, all three of whom received heartfelt congratulations for their progress and perseverance! All three joined us 10 years ago in the small room that I was renting at the time from the Sisters of the Assumption. Since then, they have grown, learned, persevered and blossomed! Each one received her own sewing machine as an encouragement. Perhaps they would like to start a small business of sewing, knitting and embroidery from home? Djamilia, Rayana and Maâmoura always come to work at the Centre from Monday to Friday, but the weekend will allow them to start a small business, to

show their ability to create and manage their own schedules. This is a path that leads to independence and recognition!

Ouma, 17 years old with a 15-month baby

Before reaching this independence, however, some very tortuous and painful paths must still be trod. Ouma was barely 16 years old when a man abused her, promising money and a better life for her and her parents. Of course, she never saw him again. She came alone one March morning to the Centre gate with her baby wrapped on her back. Ouma had been going to school for a while, but she had stopped going the day her mother died, due to stomach pains. She was the one who had to support her siblings, going to the local market every day to sell firewood or porridge, which she had prepared during the night. We offered her the possibility to resume her schooling, though she would be a little taller than the other girls in the class, in CM2. She was delighted to return school and attend classes in a nice classroom, which never reaches the 70 to 90 student capacity as it does in most public schools. We found a nice nanny next to the Centre to look after the baby while Ouma studied in class. She says hello to her baby during the lunch break and picks him up in the late afternoon.

Hadizatou, 14 years old

Hadizatou is 14 years old, and a tragedy befell her four months ago.

Child Protection Services came to the Centre with the girl to ask us to take care of her and to provide her with psychological support, because she had been raped by a man nearly 70 years old. Hadizatou was walking in the sandy streets of her neighbourhood when an old man asked her to help him carry water to his hut. Under duress, she could not defend herself. The mother, seeing her daughter's condition on her return, immediately alerted the police and the old man was arrested and imprisoned. We took Hadizatou and her mother to the hospital in Zinder so that she could undergo a series of medical tests. Hadizatou feels safe now at the Centre with her new friends, and is gradually regaining her beautiful smile and the manner of a young girl who has a lot to study and learn about life.

Colonel Barazé's visit

I met Colonel Barazé after the 2010 military coup in Niger. He was appointed Governor of Zinder. The Colonel was an invaluable help over the following two years, enabling me to acquire the land that now houses the *Après-demain* Centre, and greatly facilitating administrative procedures and contacts. I greatly appreciate the rigour and discipline of the military, which allowed me to set up my activities under an efficient amount of encouragement and support. To this day, the Colonel remains informed about the Centre's operations and concerned about its sustainability. I had long wished to invite him to Zinder so that he could discover and visit the Centre for himself. During his interim appointment as Governor, he was one of the first to support and comment on it in Zinder, before the civilians took over.

The Colonel was very moved to see how the Association has developed, and took note of the many things built since his departure. He was kind enough to participate in and give a speech during the food distribution that I had organized at the Centre to help the families of the school children. His wise advice and clear-sightedness touched the hundreds of mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers and aunts present. Together, we are thinking about the best way to continue the activities at the Centre. How can we maintain sustainability, and with whom particularly?

During his stay, I hired a young director from Zinder who filmed life at the Centre for four days. We now have a nice little 15-minute film that I would have so much liked to show during the General Assembly on April 1st, but which has been postponed until October 7, due to the pandemic. You will soon discover a quiver of very happy children playing, learning, eating, discovering and helping one another at the Centre. They also enjoy observing the two assistants from Switzerland, who have come to participate in the improvement and expansion of the Centre! Colonel Barazé also contributes his invaluable testimony. Our new, recently hired employees are featured as they participate actively and professionally in the evolution and stability of the Centre!



It is reassuring and encouraging to have local staff who are involved, touched and aware of the Association's cause, dedicated to the orphaned children, albinos and young mothers in their region.

The accountant and HR manager, Ms. Agaïcha, is rigorous and professional, which I like very much! I can count on her, and she doesn't count her hours. She always makes sure that her work is impeccable and fair.

Zeinabou is asserting herself, gaining confidence and continuing to develop her potential as a secretary at the Centre.

Our dear nanny Aïchatou, who, for now, is the only one with 10 years of experience at the Association, continues her efforts and pours out all her motherly love to the 330 children and young girls of the Centre, whose names and stories she knows by heart!

Binta, the nurse who takes care of everyone, happily sees her workplace expand and overflow. As soon as the new convalescence room is finished, she will have more space to welcome and care for sick children at the Centre.

When our director retired, a new director with an expertise in socio-educational support joined our team. Mr. Ali is highly motivated and brings a dynamic curriculum to pupils of the middle and high school levels. His supervision of young people and staff is much welcome and valued.

For the first time in the history of the Association, we have found a very efficient and honest technical manager! Mr. Abdourahamane is a foreman in Zinder. We had been working with him since 2017 for major works and renovations. My technical team in Switzerland was satisfied with his performance and conduct, so I offered him a fixed contract with the Association, which he accepted immediately. The smile on his face was indicative of his great gratitude. I believe that if I had been a man at that time, he would have taken me in his arms, he was so happy!

A visit to two bush villages with albino children

We had a great outing on a Saturday in March. Nine of us - five adults and four albino children - in two 4x4s that we had rented for the day, went out to reach the traditional bush villages about ten kilometres from the border of Nigeria on a sandy road. One of the two vehicles got stuck in sand gullies and we had to manoeuvre back and forward, again and again, to get out of them.

The purpose of this visit was to raise public awareness for our Centre in Zinder. At the time of this writing, 27 albino children live at the Centre. Four of these albino children come from two villages bordering Nigeria, and certain inhabitants of the villages accused the fathers of the albino children of having sold their children. They said that they would never see them alive again. Beliefs are still very strong in these remote and rural areas. Thanks to the presence of our accountant, secretary, nanny and nurse, we were able to prove that these children are in good care, and are being provided with schooling and educational supervision. The albino children were able to speak freely with the villagers and everyone was reassured. The Sultan of the region was kind enough to accompany us and escort us to the two villages. We finished at his place, with a good meal made of rice and chicken, before getting back in the 4x4 and heading home, enduring two hours of hellish shaking! My dear ladies of the Centre were all sore the next day!



In one of the traditional bush villages, with the Sultan of the region and the albino children born there.

Karima, mother of four, living at the Centre

Karima has been sick for years. Her youngest child (6 years old) is in school at the Centre. Karima has had several children with several men. Mariama, Aïchatou and Oumarou are her eldest, and have been welcomed by the Association for years. They appear in the documentary films of Jean-Philippe Rapp and Ian Jaquier. Mariama, one of the eldest, could no longer walk after she suffered a bad fall. Thanks to the help of wonderful people in Switzerland as well as a sponsorship, she has regained the use of her legs and is now studying at college level, like her brother Oumarou and her sister Aïchatou. My dear Agaïcha, Zeinabou and Aïchatou from the Centre had strongly suggested that I visit Karima before she died. She could no longer feed herself, swallowing had become very trying for her and her heart no longer properly oxygenated her body. It was a painful moment for both my staff and her children, who were already saying their good-byes. Karima asked for her children to be well taken care of and kept at the Centre when she was gone.

She passed on Thursday, March 26.

Situation in Niger – Covid-19 and safety measures

The Government of Niger adopted and published a list of 26 measures to be enforced as early as March 13th and 17th, as soon as the virus arrived in Africa. A curfew in Niamey, the only city currently affected by the virus, was introduced from 7 pm to 6 am for a period of two weeks, with an option to renew. All public and private schools had to be closed for 15 days, renewable if necessary. The closure comes parallel to the official, previously-scheduled two-week school holiday. We will know whether or not the Centre will be able to welcome back its pupils and young girls for lessons and sewing on April 6th.

The nanny and nurse live year-round at the Centre and take care of the 22 orphan and albino children who remain with us around the clock. A few albino children live several hundred kilometres from Zinder. The land borders have been closed, blocking all buses and vehicles. For the time being, they are locked down in Zinder, and no one will be able to get in or out for the next few weeks. The other children living at the Centre no longer have family ties in Zinder to take care of them, so we have decided to keep them at the Centre rather than risk not seeing them return after the holidays. The risk of begging or being abused in the alleys of Zinder is very real.

There are ten confirmed cases of Covid-19 at the time of this writing in the capital Niamey. The authorities have taken emergency measures to avoid any contagion of the virus. We know that it is not the virus that moves, it is people who move.

It would seem that there is the beginning of a general feeling of anger against the Europeans and the Chinese "who brought this virus to Africa". For the second Friday in a row, group prayers have been forbidden in all places of worship, to avoid a possible spread. This Friday, demonstrators expressed their dissatisfaction in Zinder, following the ban on group prayers. Tyres were burned, churches and the CCFN (Centre Culturel Franco Nigérien) were targeted. As soon as I was informed, I contacted our accountant to ask everyone to be very vigilant in the coming weeks. And on the advice of a humanitarian colleague, I asked her to buy some whistles and give them to all adults present at the Centre, hoping that they will not need to use them to defend themselves.

Following a hijacking of military equipment in Niger, an unauthorized demonstration nevertheless took place in mid-March in the capital of Niamey. Five people were killed. Otherwise, all is well!

Upcoming events:

Wednesday, April 1, 2020

10th General Assembly of the Association

- **RESCHEDULED to Wednesday, October 7, 2020 at 20.00 Hôtel de Ville in Romont**



THANK YOU for your precious and generous participation, contribution, friendship, encouragement, fidelity and benevolence, which touch me deeply and allow me to bring, with my formidable and dynamic committee in Switzerland, concrete and direct help out in the field! Even in these difficult times, **THANK YOU** for your trust!

With my warm and grateful thoughts!

And the sparkling smiles of the 330 children and girls at the 2nd Chance School!

I wish you all good health; take care of yourself and stay warm if you can!

Isabelle Macheret

Founder

Au Cœur du Niger Association

Zinder Niger, March 2020

www.aucoeurduniger.ch