

The Salikenni Scholarship Fund

Annual Report
November, 2008

The whole family was gathered around us, listening intently, in the sandy open courtyard of their compound in the village of Mandori.

There was Ebrima Jallow, 16, a slender boy who is one of our new scholarship students; his father, Wallem Jallow, a farmer and cattle raiser, who was wearing a long blue robe; Ebrima's mother, Kaddy, a slender woman; the father's elder brother, Momodou, in a white robe; several other men and women of various ages, and at least a dozen small children.

The sun had set but still tinted the undersides of scattered white clouds a brilliant pink. Small bursts of squall-like wind whipped through the compound. Lightning flashed in the distance, accompanied by muted thunder.

The first step was to explain why I and Lamin Fatty, vice principal of the Salikenni Basic Cycle School, had come. Fatty began in Mandinka so that everyone would understand. This family actually is of the Fula tribe, but Mandinka serves as a unifying vernacular in the region.

We were here, Fatty explained, because a committee in Salikenni had selected "this boy," Ebrima, for a scholarship which would carry him from his present level, grade 7, through high school and, if he qualified, into higher education within the country, including the University of The Gambia. Our scholarship program is based in Salikenni, a village of 3,500 people in the very poor North Bank region of The Gambia, in West Africa. But it is also open to young people from Mandori, Dobo and other smaller villages which either have no school or none beyond grade 6, and whose children therefore attend the Salikenni school.

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Two new scholarship students from the neighboring village of Mandori, which has no school: Bakary Jammeh (L) and Ebrima Jallow (R). Both want to become doctors. Photo taken at the Salikenni school, which they both attend.

The Salikenni Scholarship Fund

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Program Overview

The Salikenni Scholarship Fund is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to increasing educational opportunity for boys and girls of the village of Salikenni in the rural North Bank region of The Gambia in West Africa, and several smaller surrounding villages.

We provide:

Scholarships from 7th grade through high school and — depending on the student’s ability — continuing through higher education within the country, including the University of The Gambia. Students are selected by a village committee on the basis of financial need and academic ability. We currently sponsor 58 students, including 7 at a Gambian business college and one at the University of The Gambia.

Tutoring classes in English and math for students at all levels.

A library in the Salikenni school.

We estimate that we need to raise \$14,660 for the next academic year (2009-10). Please see Page 10 for contribution details. We are also looking for volunteers with education experience to help and advise us here at home or to travel to The Gambia, at personal expense, to help us improve the program there.

For more information see our website: www.salikenni.org



The Gambia

Population 2006 (millions)	1.7
Annual income per person (GNI)	\$310
Life expectancy at birth (years)	59
% of population living on less than \$1 per day	59
Child deaths 2006 (by age 5 per 1,000 live births)	113
Estimated HIV prevalence (% ages 15-49)	2.4

Primary school enrollment 2006 (% of age group)	
Boys	78
Girls	77
Secondary school enrollment 2006 (% of age group)	
Boys	49
Girls	41

Source: UNICEF

History

Former British colony
Independent since 1965



Government

Parliamentary democracy for three decades. In 1994, a group of military officers led by Lieut. Yahya Jammeh overthrew the elected government. In 1996 Jammeh was elected as civilian president. He was re-elected in 2001 and 2006 for five-year terms. His party has a majority in the legislature.

(Continued from page 1)

Mandori is one of those with no school. Its children walk to Salikenni in a ragged line each morning and home again each evening. It's a 45 minute walk. We know this because Fatty and I, to use a local expression, had "footed it" on the narrow sand roads, through recently harvested fields of groundnuts, from Salikenni to Mandori earlier that day.

Wallem Jallow, the boy's father, speaking in slow, cadenced Mandinka, translated by Fatty, said his grandfather had been a farmer and cattleman. He had given Wallem's father no choice but to follow the same profession. Wallem's father, in turn, had given him no other choice. People didn't think of education in those days. Wallem did not want his son to be forced into "that trap." The entire family, Wallem said, wanted Ebrima to be educated so that he might contribute to the family, the village, the society and the country.

We turned to questioning Ebrima, who had been listening quietly. What would he like to become? He replied without hesitation and in a clear voice, "I would like to be a doctor." We outlined the steps he would have to take to reach this goal: Work very hard, particularly on math, science and English; finish grade 9 with superior exam results in order to get into the science track in one of the best high schools; finish high school with superlative exam marks; then enter the University of The Gambia's seven-year medical school. The Scholarship Fund would cover it all, provided he did his part. "You can do it," I told him. "Yes," Ebrima replied in a tone of certainty.

He actually was our second prospective doctor in the same village that day. Earlier Fatty and I had interviewed Bakary Jammeh, 16, a husky boy who lives in a nearby compound and also is a new student in the scholarship program. Asked why he chose this profession, Bakary had replied: "There is no doctor in this village." We also had stopped to say hello to Isatou Marong, a very shy Mandori girl who was admitted to the program a year ago and is now in grade 8. She would like to have a career in computers.

It was now very dark in the Jallow compound, except for flashes of lightning in the distance. Uncle Momodou made a long speech, saying the family was deeply moved that someone would come all the way from the United States to The Gambia and to Mandori and to this compound to offer this boy an education. They would give him all the support within their power. They would see that nothing interfered with his studies. One after another, other members of the family made essentially the same speech. The crowd had grown. Bakary, the other boy we had interviewed, stood on the edges with some of his family.

(Continued on page 4)



Alimatou Bah, 16, is another of our new scholarship students from a neighboring village, this one called Dobo. She's in grade 7 at the Salikenni school. She wants to be a journalist. This photo was taken in her family compound.

(Continued from page 3)

Uncle Momodou said it was late and very dark. He offered to hitch up his donkey cart and give Fatty and me a ride back to Salikenni. We said we would walk. The family gave us a small, covered plastic pail of milk to take home. We set off on the narrow sand road, guided by my pocket flashlight. Gambian tradition decrees that guests should always be escorted part way home, and so Ebrima and Bakary walked silently behind us for about 10 minutes. Then they thanked us and said goodnight.

Fatty and I walked on together. The lightning and thunder continued in the distance, but the rain held off. The night was infused with joy and optimism. Think of it! Two prospective doctors and a female computer whiz from little Mandori! But optimism at some point must meet reality. The reality is that these students will have to deal with many obstacles to reach their goals.

The first obstacle will be the Salikenni Basic Cycle School itself, with some 700 students in grades 1-9. For a long time the school, like so many others throughout the country, has essentially failed in its mission to give children the foundation they need for high school and beyond. At the end of academic year 2007-08, 58 of the school's ninth graders sat for the examination which the Gambian school administration uses to determine which students are eligible for high school. The exam is conducted by an outside group, the West African Examination Council, based in Ghana. Only 9 of the 58 achieved the cut-off mark for admission to government high schools.

The breakdown of these results into the four "core" subjects shows an alarming pattern:

54 of the 58 got an "F" in English (the official language of the country.)

56 failed in math.

49 failed in science.

46 failed in social and environmental studies.

Within the SSF program, 4 out of our 9 candidates achieved the government cut-off. The year before, 5 out of our 7 candidates did so. The year before that, none of our candidates passed. For the school's 49 students who failed on the recent exam, the outlook is grim. Some will find high schools willing to waive the admission requirements. But for many, their education will simply stop at this level.

When I visited it in November, the school had an acute shortage of teachers. It had no English teacher. Almami Touray, who had taught third grade the year before, was teaching English in grades 7-9. There should have been two science teachers, but there was only one, Baba Ceesay, who also was teaching agriculture, because there was no agriculture teacher. There was no home economics teacher. As I walked by their classroom one day, the ninth grade class in that subject was entertaining itself doing stretching exercises.

There was no teacher for social and environmental science (SES). Earlier in the term, Alasana Dibba, a high school graduate, had taught SES as an unpaid volunteer. But he left without warning one day to continue his own education in the urban area. As it happened, that was the day I visited the ninth grade SES class.

As I entered, Haruna Jallow, the school's Head Boy (equivalent to an elected Student Council co-president) had taken over the class and was writing on the board. He wrote: "An eclipse is the obscuring of the light of either the sun or the moon." Haruna was not copying from a textbook. There was not a single SES textbook in the room. Haruna was copying from the notebook of another classmate, Fabakary Kassama. Fabakary is a member of our

scholarship program. He sits up front and has a reputation for taking good notes. The notes Haruna copied were from a class the previous week.

Unfortunately, Fabakary's notes did not explain the difference between a lunar and solar eclipse or what causes them. I found myself in the unaccustomed role of diagramming each of them on the board.

My visits to other classes made clear that throughout the "upper school," grades 7-9, virtually none of the students had been issued textbooks. But I saw a storeroom in which hundreds of textbooks for every grade were piled in cartons and in stacks almost to the ceiling, gathering dust.

This resulted from a monumental policy misunderstanding. A couple of decades ago, the World Bank, as part of its aid to African schools, decided that poor countries could not give textbooks away free, because they could not afford the re-printing costs. The bank devised a system under which children rented their books and returned them at year-end. The rental fee would go to maintaining the stock. The problem with this was that most parents paid only the school fee, not the book rental, and so many students had no books. At the start of this academic year, the Gambian government abolished the book rental system. The books are now to be distributed free, but students are asked to return them at year-end or pay a fine. But somehow this policy change was not communicated to the Salikenni school, which continued to ask for, but never receive, book rental fees. So the books just stayed in the storeroom. It was not until the ninth week of the school year that free distribution of textbooks began in Salikenni.

Soon after the current school year began, Sulayman Darboe, one of the Scholarship Fund's best eighth grade students became so fed up with the school's shortcomings that he left Salikenni, moved in with an uncle in the metropolitan area and enrolled in a middle school there. We transferred his scholarship to the new school. Describing his experience in Salikenni, Sulayman said, "We didn't learn. We just go and depart for home." Sulayman wants to go to college or the university. He, too, wants to become a doctor. His best subject is science.

The underlying problems at the Salikenni school recently were exacerbated by two unexpected events. First, Principal Sankung Daffeh left abruptly in May and made his way to the United States. He left behind a leadership vacuum with no one clearly in charge. A new principal, Njundu Fadera, came in during the last month of the school year. He has made a vigorous effort to turn things around. (See Page 9.) The second event actually had begun months earlier. A teacher had administered corporal punishment to a student, drawing blood. The boy's father had raised a huge ruckus.



SSF ninth grade student Fabakary Kas-sama. His notes saved the day.



SSF eighth grade student Sulayman Darboe was so fed up with conditions that he transferred to another school.

Though the dispute ostensibly had been settled, somehow it continued to smolder. People took sides. A couple of houses were stoned. At the end of the year four teachers left the school: one to attend college, one to accept a new posting, and two who said they feared their lives were in danger. Fadera requested replacement teachers, but was told by the regional office that none were available. He began calling former colleagues around the country to see if they knew of anybody he might recruit. But, as this was written, he still had not found any replacements.

Coming to the Kombos

Each year ninth grade students throughout The Gambia sit the West African Examination Council exam which they hope will be their ticket into high school, usually in the metropolitan area, which Gambians call the Kombos. The results always are dismal. Last year 80 percent of Gambian ninth graders completely failed English, 85 per cent failed math, 79 per cent failed science and 60 per cent failed social and environmental studies.

The results also are announced very late, usually weeks after the start of the next school year. There then begins a chaotic scramble for places in tenth grade in Kombos high schools. Students and their parents or guardians troop from school to school. Long queues form outside principals' offices. Though schools are supposed to start in early September, this year the sorting out process lasted through October and into November.

After this late start, students entering government high schools in the metropolitan area find themselves in vastly overcrowded classrooms. They often have trouble getting the textbooks for which their parents or sponsors have paid. This year some of our students in Gambia Senior Secondary School in Banjul got their books in November only after Fatou Janneh went to commercial book stalls in the city and bought them. The big Kombos high schools are full of students who are basically unprepared for high school, including many who can barely read. They fail their core courses but are routinely promoted anyway. The policy at Gambia Senior is to promote a student from grade 10 to 11 or 11 to 12 if his or her year-end average is 30 per cent or more, even though anything below 40 is deemed a failure.

Though new high schools are opening continuously, there still are not enough places. In 2007, 19,000 sat the ninth grade exam nationally, but only 7,000 sat the exam at the end of grade 12. In other words, less than 40 percent of ninth grade graduates went on to finish high school.

Among our 9 scholarship students who took the ninth grade exam at the end of last year, four did well and sailed into high schools. Two did so poorly that we are having them repeat not just grade 9 but instead go back to grade 8 in Kombos middle schools in an effort to get a foundation for high school. Three others should have repeated grade 9 but refused. They wangled their way into high schools despite the admission rules. We declined to pay for them. Their parents and



Baba Fatajo, 22, this year made the leap from the village to a metro area high school. He's in grade 10 at Masroor Senior Secondary. His father wanted him to be an Arabic teacher, and Baba spent 6 years in Arabic school before starting government primary school. At Masroor he's in the commerce track.

relatives have scraped up enough to pay for at least the first term. These three students continue to attend our weekend tutoring classes. At year-end we will see whether to fully sponsor them next year.

In fairness, it should be noted that the Gambian school system has made huge progress in recent decades. It now comes very close to providing access for all children to a “basic” education from grade 1 through grade 9. That access now is mostly free for girls but not yet for boys. The government’s focus has shifted in recent years from access to quality. It has introduced a phonics curriculum in the lower grades in an effort to help children learn to read. It is training more teachers at all levels, although Gambian teachers still are so poorly paid that few want to enter or remain in that profession. Among all of our students recently interviewed, only one, a girl, said she wants to be a teacher.



Fatoumata Fatty, 16, got the best score among our Salikenni 9th graders on last year’s exam. She’s now in 10th grade at Muslim Senior Secondary in Banjul.

The focal point of our scholarship program in the Kombos is the backyard of our manager, Fatou Janneh’s house in Sukuta. Sukuta is a forlorn backwater of the metropolitan suburbs. Its main street is an unpaved obstacle course of ruts, gullies, areas of soft sand and, during the rainy season, vast pools of muddy water. The condition of the road seems to get worse every year. The street is lined by tiny shops --- tailoring, food, hardware, carpentry, auto repair, photo copying, “fashion” clothing and a TV and video parlor that draws overflow crowds during major soccer matches. Fatou Janneh’s backyard is shaded by lemon trees.

Our Kombos students gather in the yard every weekend. First they spread out mats on the sand and pray. (Their hometown, Salikenni, is a Muslim village.) Fatou Janneh serves them a big lunch of rice, with a different topping each day. Then they walk to a nearby primary school where they attend the Scholarship Fund’s tutoring classes --- math on Saturdays, taught by Sampha Kamara, who teaches at two local schools; English on Sundays, taught by Fatou.

Thirty students are eligible to attend these classes. On a recent Saturday 24 showed up. The group has grown over the years because it now includes so many categories of students, ranging from the grade 8 repeaters to five students studying accounting or commerce or computer technology at a local business school and our one student at the University of The Gambia.

There is a strong sense of cohesion among these students. At the end of one English class which I attended, the higher education students convened a meeting with the new tenth graders. They welcomed them. They stressed that these classes are compulsory, although there would always be valid reasons to skip now and then. They warned the newcomers against taking up with bad company in the Kombos. And they told them if they don’t understand something in any of their courses, “come to us and we will help you.”

With this kind of group spirit to help them, maybe, just maybe, our students such as Ebrima and Bakary and Isatou in Mandori might make it through the obstacle course after all and reach their goals. — Don May

Other SSF Initiatives

Individual scholarships are and will continue to be the main focus of our program. But the Scholarship Fund has also, in recent years, taken several initiatives aimed at helping the Salikenni school improve the quality of education for our own students as well as for all other students at the school.

The library

Since 2003 we have maintained a library at the school to encourage the habit of reading for enjoyment and also for research. Most of the initial 1,000 books were donated by schools and libraries in our part of the United States, and many were too American oriented. We have gradually added books by African authors or those of more direct interest to people there.

But the library, in our view, has been underutilized, mainly because we have had great difficulty finding and keeping full-time librarians. This year not one but two international volunteer organizations have come to the aid of the library. Olivia Sappenfield, a Peace Corps volunteer from Atlanta, who is stationed in the village, has taken an interest in the library and is helping to reorganize the shelves. She also is teaching some of the math and English classes in the Salikenni upper grades. Meanwhile, Natalie Crepwell and Ivo Jonker, volunteers from VSO, the British counterpart of the Peace Corps, are helping to set up a management system for the library which doesn't require a full-time librarian. VSO has developed a model for village library management, which starts with the creation of a village Library Committee, including teachers, students and members of the community. VSO trains the committee members in library management. They then decide the library hours and rules, and they take turns being on duty. Salikenni's Library Committee now has been established.

The Study Circle

For several years we have sponsored after-school classes in Salikenni, particularly for ninth graders facing the all-important exam. We were never convinced of their effectiveness. This year we are trying them again, but with a new twist. Extra classes for ninth graders now are being held Monday through Thursday nights in the library. (Rural electrification reached Salikenni last year, and we installed lights in the library.)

The classes are in English and math on alternating nights. Almami Touray, the third grade teacher now pressed into teaching grade 7-9 English, was their main designer. He wanted them to be as unlike the regular school classes as possible. There would be no lecturing, no writing definitions on the board for students to copy, no learning by rote. Instead there would be maximum student participation and discussion. Sometimes students would be divided into groups to study a topic on their own. Touray didn't even want to call them "extra classes." He calls them the "Study Circle."

The Study Circle is compulsory for our sponsored students, but is also open to as many other ninth graders as will fit in the library. Simultaneously, similar classes are taking place for SSF students in grades 7 and 8 in the front room of the principal's house, which also has electricity.

Teacher visits

In 2007 and 2008, we invited a series of professional educators from Vermont and New Hampshire to accompany Don on trips to Salikenni. The first was Rob Edson, then principal of the Marion Cross Elementary School in Norwich, VT; then Anne Segal, a retired teacher and administrator; and most recently Robert Scobie, a retired special education teacher. Their travel,

like that of Don and Alison, is entirely at personal expense. They have turned over teaching materials and shared ideas with the local teachers. These visits are the start of what we hope will be continuing contacts between American and Salikenni teachers. We are looking for new volunteers, or previous ones willing to repeat, in order to carry this effort forward.

Salikenni's New Principal

Njundu Fadera, the new principal of the Salikenni Basic Cycle School, is fully aware of the challenge he faces.

He has taken command of a school that is woefully short of teachers, a school still in turmoil from the sudden departure of its previous principal, where morale among staff and students alike has been shaken by recent dismal exam results, in a village that for one reason or another tends every year to turn small disputes into big ones. And out of all this he wants to create a quality education for Salikenni children.

The school's budget won't help him much. The fees which parents and sponsors pay go into the school's bank account. But after paying the required salaries of the school's bursar, secretary and caretakers, and buying supplies such as chalk, there is essentially no budget left to make any improvements.



Fadera at school

Fadera, 56, was born in Salikenni. That will be an asset, but it may also mean he will be tested by village politics and will have to prove he can be independent and tough.

He attended primary school in Salikenni, then middle and high school in the metropolitan area. He began his teaching career in 1987, at first without a formal scertificate. Later he earned primary and secondary teaching certificates at Gambia College. His teaching specialty is arts and crafts. He has also served as deputy and principal in other schools.

P.S.

In our 2007 annual report, we noted that Amadou Njie, a Salikenni student under our sponsorship since 8th grade, had started the Access Program at the University of The Gambia. He would spend a year attending University classes in English and math, two subjects for which his high school exam results did not meet the admission standards. We are happy to report now that Amadou passed both subjects and is now a full fledged, 4-year, bachelor's degree student at the University, majoring in economics and finance. He is the first of our students to reach the University.

The Salikenni Scholarship Fund
 Financial Statement as of November 20, 2008

US Bank Balance, July 1, 2007	\$26,656
Contributions 7/01/07-11/20/08	11,950
Interest 7/01/07-11/20/08	<u>1,031</u>
Total	\$39,637

		Estimated costs for balance of 2008/09	Estimated costs for 2009/10
Expenditures 7/01/07-11/20/08			
Students ¹	\$14,365	\$1,792	\$10,140
Administrative costs ²	1,558	512	1,100
Tutoring (Salikenni & Kombos)	900	540	635
Weekend classes – food, fares	2,500	903	1,765
Library electrification & librarian’s salary	800	-	-
Salikenni Workshop for Teachers	317	-	-
Computer, printer, ISP connection, mo. fees	1,447	300	720
Miscellaneous	<u>332</u>	<u>300</u>	<u>300</u>
Total Expenditures	\$22,219*	\$4,347	\$14,660
On hand (U.S.) November 20, 2008			\$12,995
On hand (Gambia) November 20, 2008			<u>4,359</u>
Total on hand November 20, 2008			\$17,417

* We pay tuition for the whole year at the beginning of each academic year. This report, however, covers payments for 2007/08 and 2008/09 through November 20, 2008.

¹ Includes tuition, books, exam fees, extra supplies for students, higher education, and uniforms as needed.
² Administrative costs include salary for Fatou Jammeh and bank fees.

Note: The costs of travel for Don and others to Salikenni, and of producing this report have not been paid out of SSF funds.

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We are grateful to our past supporters and welcome new ones! If you feel you are able to help once again, you will make it possible for The Fund to continue giving financial aid to our students.

The Salikenni Scholarship Fund is a 501(c)(3) organization, and all contributions are tax-deductible. The tax ID number is 03-035-3911.

**Checks should be made payable to:
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Again, thank you for your support!

Don and Alison May, administrators