

# The Salikenni Scholarship Fund

Annual Report  
November, 2009

In the library at the Salikenni Basic Cycle School most of the students read by pronouncing each word quietly to themselves. When the library is full their soft voices combine to form a steady hum reminiscent of busy bees.

The library is an oasis of cleanliness in a school of white-washed buildings of varying ages, most with rough concrete floors and dilapidated furniture, their windows open to the reddish dust that blows through the village and covers everything. In contrast, the library floor is shiny black and gray linoleum, locally called “carpet.” Without being told, the children step out of their flip-flops as they enter, leaving them lined up outside the doorway.

Librarian Fatou Darboe keeps the place spotless. The books are neatly lined up on the shelves in color-coded categories. The tabletops are always wiped clean. Fatou keeps meticulous records of books borrowed and returned in a big red notebook. If a book is long overdue she chases down the student in his classroom. She repairs the damaged spines of books with duct tape.

Salikenni is a village of about 3,500 people in the very poor North Bank region of The Gambia in West Africa. The village is a network of sandy lanes, many of them narrow and twisting. It is organized into family compounds, surrounded by fences of cement block, or more often, rusting corrugated roofing material nailed to wooden stakes. Inside the compounds, the houses are of whitewashed cement block or dark red mud brick. Most have roofs of the same rusty corrugate as is used for fencing. Almost everyone is a farmer, growing mainly peanuts and rice with primitive tools on very small plots on tired land outside the village.

Since 1996, the Salikenni Scholarship Fund, a non-profit organization based in Vermont, has provided scholarships for children of the poorest families in the village and several satellite villages, starting in seventh grade and extending, for those who can make it, as high as the University of The Gambia.

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*Librarian Fatou Darboe reads a story to a sixth grade class.*

## 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 nearby villages. We provide:

**Scholarships** starting in grades 7-9 at the government school in Salikenni, continuing through high school, usually in the Banjul metropolitan area, and — for those who can make it — in higher education, including the University of The Gambia. Our students are selected on the basis of financial need and academic ability. We strive for an equal number of boys and girls. We currently sponsor 63 students, including 30 at the Salikenni school, 23 in urban secondary schools and 10 in higher education.

**A library** at the Salikenni village school. We pay the salary of the librarian.

**Weekend classes** in English and math for our students in the urban area. This year we have provided three computers with internet access for these students.

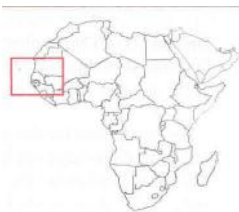
This annual report is based on a visit to The Gambia from October 8 to November 8, 2009, by Don May, co-administrator of the Fund, including two weeks in Salikenni. He found that:

- The library is functioning well. The librarian reads stories to young children. Older students are gradually becoming more interested in reading for enjoyment.
- The village school has a new principal, a good manager, who has set out to raise its standards, including the teaching of phonics in the early grades.
- The computers and internet access which we have provided for our urban students are being used effectively for their education.
- An increasing number of our students are headed into higher education, including the University of The Gambia.

The transition of our students into higher education is a mark of our progress, but it also raises our costs. We estimate that we need to raise \$18,000 for the next academic year (2010-11). Please see Page 10 for contribution details. We also continue to look 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 please visit our website: [www.salikenni.org](http://www.salikenni.org)**

## The Gambia



Population 2007 (millions)	1.7
Annual income per person 2007 (GNI)	\$320
Life expectancy at birth 2007 (years)	59
Child deaths by age 5 per 1,000 live births.	109

The Gambia is a former British colony, independent since 1965. "The" is part of its official name. President Yahya Jammeh was most recently re-elected in 2006 for a 5-year term.

*(Continued from page 1)*

The library is an additional initiative on which we have been working for a number of years. In 2003 we sent over 1,000 books, donated by schools and libraries in the Upper Valley region of Vermont and New Hampshire. We have gradually renovated the small library building, and we pay the salary of the librarian. Over the past two years we have added a large collection of story books about Africa, many by African authors, at different levels of reading difficulty. When students enter the library these are the shelves they head for first.

In its early years, under a succession of librarians, the library kept falling into total disorganization. On periodic visits we would find easy readers scattered throughout the history and science sections. The shelves were a jumble of books upside down or backwards, a lot of them with pages missing.

Fatou Darboe herself is quite a success story. After she had completed second grade her father, a farmer and owner of a small shop, told her that education was not meant for girls, and she had to drop out. She taught herself to read and write. She taught nursery school and later became an uncertified teacher in the government-run Salikenni school, assigned to first grade. In those days, the lower grades were routinely given to the least experienced teachers.

In January 2009 the Gambian government dismissed all of its uncertified teachers who had not achieved a certain level of results in high school. That meant that Fatou Darboe could no longer teach first grade, and the following month we hired her as librarian. Since then she has been growing rapidly into the job.

At first she was a novice reader, plodding through books for primary school children a word at a time. But she studied these stories until she knew them by heart. She began reading them to children in the lower grades, holding the book up to show them the pictures. If they didn't understand in English she explained the story in Mandinka. She loved these books. In every idle moment in the library she would read by herself.

In less than a year her own reading skill has improved remarkably. She now reads better than many ninth graders at the school. She has begun working with small groups of very poor readers in grades 7-9, teaching them how to sound out a word that stumps them.

She tells these students, "If you don't know a word, ask someone. That's what I did. That's how I learned to read. Don't be afraid to ask."

*(Continued on page 4)*



*Bubacarr Bah, Alimatou Ceesay and Sulayman Ceesay are three of our new scholarship students in grade 7 in Salikenni this year. Bubacarr (left) lives in a grass-roofed hut in the village of Dobo, an hour's walk from the school. Last summer unusually heavy rains flooded parts of Dobo and destroyed many houses, but his survived. His family raises cattle. He's an avid soccer player. His team is called the Obama Club. Alimatou (center) lives with her mother in Salikenni. The front room of their whitewashed house contains two cots and a table but little else. The floor is bare cement. Alimatou's chores include laundering, sweeping, fetching water, pounding grain and cooking. Her specialty is domoda, made of rice, peanuts, tomato and spices. To succeed in school she will have to improve her reading. We have urged her to keep visiting the library. Sulayman (not related to Alimatou) comes from a very large extended Salikenni family which puts a high value on education. He reads well. An older brother and sister finished high school and both work for newspapers in the capital city. But Sulayman wants to be a banker.*

*(Continued from page 3)*

### **Why Binta Can't Read**

On a recent day, when the library was filled with the hum of a ninth grade class on its library period, one ninth grade girl clearly was not contributing to the sound. We'll call her Binta. She is one of our scholarship recipients. She sat on the floor, her back resting against a wall, because there are not quite enough chairs in the library for an entire class. She had selected a thin African story for very young readers. The book was in her lap, but she had stopped looking at it. She stared as though her mind were far away. Asked to read a passage from the book, she could not. Binta basically cannot read. In recent years she has failed most of her courses but always has been promoted. Her family is proud that she is getting an "education." She wants to be a nurse. In six months she will have to sit the international examination which the Gambian school system uses to determine eligibility for high school. She cannot possibly pass it. She could repeat ninth grade. But our experience in the village is that, at her reading level, she will fail again. Her education appears to be at an end.

Another of our scholarship students in ninth grade — call her Fatoumata — said that her most difficult subject is Social and Environmental Studies. Why? Because she can hardly read the textbook.

Binta and Fatoumata are not alone. In the Salikenni school and most Gambian government schools there are many grade 9 students who read far below grade level or cannot read at all. The school system failed to teach them to read in the lower grades. Despite this lack of foundation, the system promoted them year by year to their present impasse.

The Gambian school administration has focused on this problem and recently has begun teaching phonics in grade 1-6. It uses the Jolly system in which each of the 42 sounds in the English language has an action that goes with it, and students are taught to associate the letter or combination of letters and the action and the sound together.

Now when you walk past a first grade classroom in Salikenni, instead of the old chant naming each letter of the alphabet you will hear something like: "I like to jump, jump, jump up and down." The children are jumping like mad. "What letter is that?" the teacher asks. "What sound does it make?" "j-j-j-j," the students reply.

Each teacher in grades 1-6 has a thick handbook on how to teach this type of phonics, including examples of games and competitions and many songs. A monitor from the regional education office in a nearby town comes regularly to make sure the teachers are using the system. The teaching of phonics is potentially a big step forward to raise reading ability, although it still leaves a backlog of students in grades 7-9 who never got this training.

We hope the library will also gradually help to build reading ability. We tell students that the best way to learn to read is to read. We urge them to check a book out of the library every week, read it, return it and borrow another one. In the past there has been almost no



*A first grade student arranges magnetized letters on a metal board, after hearing their sounds, to spell SAT.*

culture of reading for enjoyment in the village. Families know that students are supposed to “study” their textbooks. But traditionally no one reads a story for fun. We have begun to see a slight change in this. In addition to the scheduled class library periods, during idle times of day, we see not a flood but a trickle of students coming to the library on their own to borrow books.

### **Progress at the village school**

While these changes have been taking place in the library, the Salikenni Basic Cycle School itself also has been changing for the better. The government-run school, with about 700 students in grades 1-9, has suffered from weak management, a shortage of teachers and declining academic standards in recent years. This year it has a new principal, Ibrima Njie, an experienced educator who is determined to raise its standards.

Njie, 43, has announced to parents that children who fail a grade will no longer be promoted automatically to the next grade but will have to repeat, and if necessary repeat again. He has instructed teachers to follow the curriculum, prepare lesson plans, assign homework and conduct assessment tests every two weeks. He has lengthened the school day. The morning shift now starts at 8 instead of 8:30 and ends at 2. The afternoon shift starts at 2 and runs to 6:30 instead of 6.

He has persuaded parents to promise to provide a small amount of money to buy a “set box,” containing a pencil, a sharpener, protractor and ruler, for each student in grades 7-9, plus two literature books each: abridged versions of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Great Expectations*. Asked how non-readers can cope with these books, Njie said kids need a challenge and that he has used these books successfully in another school which had similar problems.

Since there are virtually no Christians in this overwhelmingly Muslim village, Njie has obtained consent of parents to continue special classes during 14 days of the 18-day Christmas break which Gambian schools have observed since British colonial times. These classes will include remedial reading.

Well aware of the importance of community participation, he has revived the School Management Committee, a steering group under the PTA which the previous principal preferred to ignore. And he has created within the school an Academic Board, composed of himself and a handful of teachers, which meets frequently to discuss management strategies. For the first time in several years, the school this year has almost a full complement of teachers, including a qualified English teacher for grades 7-9 which it did not have last year.



*Principal Njie explains his school plans to a group of parents*

All of these steps are very encouraging. But the distance which the Gambian school system and this particular school still have to travel in order to deliver a first class education is immense. Last year 61 Salikenni students sat the ninth grade exam, which is conducted by the West African Examination Council, based in Ghana. Only 10 students passed — that is, they achieved a government cut-off mark which is supposed to determine eligibility for high school. Among our own scholarship students in that class, 13 sat the exam, 4 of whom passed.

In practice, some of those who fail talk their way into high schools anyway, but they lack the necessary foundation and, in our experience, generally do poorly. We have persuaded two of our students who failed to repeat ninth grade in schools in the metropolitan area.

Not a single Salikenni girl passed the ninth grade exam last year. Salikenni girls face a number of educational handicaps. Their household chores are never-ending: cooking, washing clothes, sweeping, fetching water from the public taps and going with their mothers to the rice paddies, traditionally operated by women. They are under pressure to marry young. In classrooms many of them tend to be shy, less willing than boys to jump into a class discussion.

In recent years the Gambian government has given free tuition to girls in rural areas including Salikenni. We bring an equal number of boys and girls into our program in seventh grade each year. We don't have to pay for the girls until they reach high school, but we do attempt to counsel them. For those who do reach higher levels of education — some of them pictured on these pages — we hold them up as role models for the younger girls.

Many Salikenni parents, who themselves never went to school, ignore their children's education. A farmer dropped by the library recently, saying he wanted to find out how his twin girls were doing in ninth grade. We had to tell him that they had failed grades 7 and 8, but each time were promoted, that they could not read and that they had little chance of passing grade 9. "I never knew it," the farmer said.

Principal Njie has urged parents at meetings to become actively involved in their children's education. Scholarship Fund manager Fatou Janneh this year formed a committee in Salikenni, composed of two women and two men from the community and two teachers, to monitor, advise and encourage our scholarship students, to make up for the lack of parental guidance. The chairman is Manka Jato Trawalley, a woman with a broad smile and a commanding voice, who says she will take a special interest in counseling the girls.



*Manka Trawalley*

### **Harnessing the Internet**

In August, 2009, the Salikenni Scholarship Fund received a grant of \$1,700 from Operation Day's Work U.S.A. to provide computer equipment and internet access for some of our students. ODW, which began in Norway in the 1960s, is an organization essentially run by school children. Every year participating schools select one or more projects in a developing country, learn about that country and then hold a Work Day to raise money.

This particular grant came from Thetford Academy in Thetford, Vermont; Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, Massachusetts, and Sacred Heart School in Mildmay, Ontario.

So far we have used part of the money to set up a network of three laptop computers for our students attending high schools and higher education in the metropolitan area of Banjul, the capital of The Gambia. There is no high school in Salikenni village, so our students who complete grade 9 at the village school generally come to the metropolitan area to continue their education.

The computers are located in Sukuta, a suburb of Banjul, in the home of Fatou Janneh, the Gambian manager of our program. Our students in the urban area meet there every weekend for tutoring classes in math and English. We have had one computer there for more than a year and now have three, networked together. The computer room is also Fatou's study and family dining room.

On a recent Saturday, Sampha Kamara, our math tutor, called six students into the room and sat them down to work in pairs, two to each laptop. He told them to go onto the internet, look up the definitions of a half dozen geometric shapes and then draw them in their notebooks.

With total concentration written on their faces, the students Googled their way to the isosceles triangle, equilateral triangle, rhombus and other shapes. They were able to manipulate them on the screen, making them tall and skinny or short and fat and turning them sideways and upside down. Kamara and Fatou Janneh's daughter, Isatou, an eleventh grade science student (not under scholarship) gave technical help, since most of these students were learning not only geometry but also the basic operation of a computer. When the students had finished another six were called in.

Kamara was excited. He said he had never had such a teaching tool to work with before. It was so much better, he said, than drawing these shapes on the blackboard and getting only glazed looks from students.

Fatou Janneh, in her own weekend English class, has used the computers to have students look up and use different parts of speech. Some of our higher education students have used them to write assignments.

Someday we would like to put computers in our library in Salikenni, but we are not yet ready to do so. Workable internet access so far is not available there. And any use of computers there would have to be part of a well-constructed plan, including a larger space, training in how to operate computers, technical backup and a realistic budget to cover the cost.



*SSF students learn geometry on the internet.*



*The three students above are among those who have come to the metropolitan area for high school under our program. Tida Colley (left) came within 2 points of passing her ninth grade exam in Salikenni last year. That was enough for us to put her into high school. She wants to be a nurse. Haruna Jallow (center) is one of three students who were not in our program last year but who passed the ninth grade exam. Their families could not pay for high school, so we gave them scholarships. Mariama M. Ceesay is the daughter of Salikenni parents who moved to the metropolitan area. An excellent student, she's now in twelfth grade. She wants to become a surgeon. We believe she will be a good example for our younger girls.*

## University bound

We tell all of our students as they come into the program, usually in grade 7, that we want to see them in the University of The Gambia and that we will pay for it. Amadou Njie is the first of our scholarship students to reach that goal. He is now in the second year of a four-year bachelor's degree program in economics and finance. Amadou joined our program in 2002 in eighth grade. His father, Abdou Njie, is an elderly Salikenni farmer with two wives and 16 children. Most of these siblings got virtually no schooling, but Amadou told his father he wanted an education, and the father consented. Amadou became the first in his family to finish high school. Since the start of high school he has lived in a 10 by 12 foot "house," which could be mistaken for a storage shed, in the suburbs of the national capital, Banjul. Usually one or two other students share the single room.

Two more of our scholarship students who finished high school last year, Momodou Lamin Darboe and a girl, Binta Njie, are clearly headed for four-year university status. They have enrolled in the university's Access Program, designed for students whose high school records almost, but not quite, meet the institution's entry requirements. Both are attending special university classes in English and math, and in Binta's case also economics. At the end of this academic year, if they pass exams in those subjects, they will be admitted fully to the university.

Two or three of our students now in eleventh grade are likely to be university candidates a year from now. In addition, seven of our students are enrolled this year in the Management Development Institute (MDI), a local business college, in various programs — business, accounting and computers.



*Pictured above are five of our scholarship students now in or headed for higher education. Amadou Njie (far left) has been with us since eighth grade and is now in his second year in a four-year bachelor's program at the University of The Gambia. Momodou Lamin Darboe and Binta Njie (2nd and 3d from left) are in the university's Access Program, after finishing high school. This one-year program allows them to improve in 2 or 3 weak subjects and usually leads to full university admission. Ousman Jarju (far right) has completed three levels of accounting courses at a local business college and is now employed as an accountant with the Gambian Ministry of Interior.*

The fact that so many of our students are going into higher education is a mark of the program's success. But it also raises our costs. The university charges about US\$700 a year, not including books, compared to about \$190 for a student in tenth grade (including books used throughout three years of high school) or about \$70 for a student in eleventh grade, or about \$19 for a student in ninth grade in Salikenni.

Partially offsetting these higher costs, we are enforcing more strictly our long-standing policy to drop students who consistently underperform. This fall we withdrew scholarships from three girls and a boy who did so poorly on their ninth grade exams that there seemed to be no

point in asking them to repeat. We dropped two boys who repeated ninth grade but failed again, plus one boy who got an unsatisfactory year-end report in tenth grade and had not communicated with our manager for a year.

At the same time, we added three students who passed the ninth grade exam in Salikenni but whose parents clearly could not afford to send them to high school.

One of these is Haruna Jallow, who comes from Kerr Sumba Naido, a tiny village of grass-roofed huts, more than an hour's walk from Salikenni. The village has only a nursery school. Many students from satellite villages attend the Salikenni school. Haruna's family is of the Fula tribe, traditionally cattle raisers. His father, however, is a farmer and blacksmith, who makes hoes, cutlasses, plows that are pulled by donkeys, and other farm tools. Haruna got good report cards in grades 7-9 in Salikenni. Last year he was voted Head Boy of the school, a post similar to Student Council president in an American school. He's now in tenth grade at Masroor Senior Secondary School in the metropolitan suburbs.

Haruna was briefly mentioned in our annual report of 2008, at probably the low point in the school's history of mismanagement and understaffing. A ninth grade class took their seats in a classroom for Social and Environmental Studies. But there was no teacher. Haruna went to the blackboard and began explaining what happens during an eclipse. There was not a single textbook in the room. Haruna wrote out a definition of an eclipse using another student's notes.

We also took in, as a tenth grade student, Momodou Jawo, who comes from an even smaller, largely Fula village an hour or so walk from Salikenni, consisting of only three compounds. He also passed his ninth grade exam, but his family could not begin to pay for him in high school. He is the first in his family to attend high school. An older brother never went to school and works as a tailor in a market village in the region. Momodou wants to be a television journalist. He doesn't see television often, but he's an admirer of Malik Jobe, who reads the news on Gambian TV.

The third student we took in at the high school level is Omar Jallow from Dobo, one of the larger satellite villages whose children attend grades 7-9 in Salikenni. His father, Naibelly Jallow, a tall, whiskered man, was able to pay part of the fee to put him into tenth grade in Farafenni, a large town in the North Bank area. But he could not come up with the full fee. We paid the remainder. Omar, a good student, wants to be a scientist.

In conclusion, this year is shaping up as a good one. The library is functioning well under an enthusiastic librarian. The village school is under new and much stronger management. The Gambian school administration is working to raise standards, especially in the teaching of reading in the lower grades. Computers are being put to good use among our students in the metropolitan area. More of our students are headed toward the university.

All of this, of course, costs money. It is too early to say whether the global financial crisis and recession will reduce donations to our program. We can say this much: This appears to be a good year to invest in the education of the children of Salikenni.

**The Salikenni Scholarship Fund**  
 Financial Statement as of November 20, 2009

US Bank Balance, 11/20/2008	\$12,995	
Gambia Bank Balance, 11/20/2008	4,359	
Contributions 11/20/08-11/20/09	7,761	Includes \$1,700 Grant from Operation Day's Work
Interest 11/20/08-11/20/09	<u>10</u>	
Total	\$25,125	
US Bank Balance, 11/20/09	\$ 7,761	
Gambia Bank Balance 11/20/09	<u>789</u>	
	\$ 8,550	

		<b>Estimated costs for balance academic year 2009/10</b>	<b>Estimated costs academic year 2010/11</b>
<b>Expenditures 11/20/08—11/20/09</b>			
Students <sup>1</sup>	\$ 9,457	\$ 600	\$11,800
Administrative costs <sup>2</sup>	1,220	300	1,200
Tutoring (Salikenni & Sukuta)	560	180	Sukuta only 360
Weekend classes – food, fares	2,580	1,105	2,600
Librarian's salary	320	420	720
Books for Salikenni library	1,059	-	500
Computers, monthly fees, Internet Security	<u>1,379</u>	<u>700</u>	<u>720</u>
Total Expenditures	\$16,575	\$4,347	\$17,900

<sup>1</sup> Includes tuition, books, exam fees, extra supplies for students, higher education, and uniforms as needed.

<sup>2</sup> 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. Because we anticipate that more students will be moving on to higher education, your generous contributions are needed!

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:  
 The Salikenni Scholarship Fund  
 c/o Don and Alison May  
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**Our telephone number is 802-649-8294  
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Again, thank you for your support!

Don and Alison May, administrators