

Week ending 15.5.10

I dispatched the weekly epistle last week while waiting for a ‘workshop’ to start. The works memo requested a prompt 9 am start. So at 11 am the papers we needed were distributed to start before we went for breakfast at 11.15; that dragged on until noon – I taught them a lesson for making me wait by eating three chicken salad ‘subs’. (Some Gambians do identify certain surnames (e.g. Touray) with gluttony, specifically, of eating more than one breakfast; Sills isn’t one of the names yet but could become my personal target.) Our task did take the rest of the afternoon; there was no real benefit to working a Saturday, indeed, I anticipate having to head up country as a consequence to deliver some training – fortunately, it is to a region where we won’t have to spend longer waiting for a ferry than the car journey itself. I was late home to commence ‘Operation Starve’ – we have promised ourselves monthly treats of meals out to break from our usual budget rations; on this occasion we had promised ourselves a brunch buffet at a local restaurant. It should last from 10 – 3 but our healthy start, following the ‘operation’ commencing at 7 the previous evening, meant the fayre was finished by 1.30. Needless to say we were well and truly sated. In the morning I noted a landmark in my time here – the can of deodorant I bought at the airport last August ran out!

Monday’s meeting with Nuha was as frustrating as anticipated; I think I hit the right buttons when I suggested we should postpone it so that it could be planned with a little more professionalism. The main sticking point was our plan to create a sub-agenda to include the Country Director for issues that extended beyond the education volunteers; i.e. Nuha’s boss. I succeeded in establishing the sub-agenda as planned but Nuha was less than happy when the conference began; he did not go through the rigmarole of a full greeting on Wednesday morning- that was un-Gambian. But so was the conference; sessions always started with 15 minutes of the proposed timings and never overran by more than half an hour. The conference room was a lean to on the cliff edge of a local hotel, which made for a good environment and view but did mean the breeze disrupted some of our papers. The Country Director arrived in the evening and did a ‘political’ job of listening to our complaints then ranted back at us with finger wagging above her head to justify her points, in true African style. I repaired some of the damage in my dealings with Nuha by suggesting he needed more support in his role (he has to manage 20 education volunteers alone; the disability sector has 6 volunteers supported by 2 members of staff = political correctness funding going too far I suspect).

After the conference, Denise, the kids and I attended a leaving party thrown by the *Smile* gap year students. We arrived too late to witness the rugby team I have been working with, alongside Chris, Tim & Matt, demonstrating their development in the street outside their compound. But the rugby boys did make up the mass of the party with their enthusiasm; unlike the alcohol fuelled exuberance one might expect in the UK, the lads were all sober in true Islamic fashion. Bradley made an observational comment – all the Gambians were wearing English clothes and all the English (*Smile* gang) were wearing Gambian clothes! I will have my work cut out organising the many photographs taken for the benefit of the rugby team if I am to keep everyone happy.

Friday was a disappointing day at college; I arrived with a plan of action for a number of admin tasks- I couldn’t complete them due to the late arrival of staff so I walked out to the area of my proposed sports field as I had noticed a corrugated iron shack had been erected nearby. It was the works shack; I couldn’t believe it – the last discussion I had held with the Dean had promised a site visit to find a common purpose a month ago. Meantime foundations have been dug into the football field denying the students access to the only sizable sports facility they had. I went to the Chancery to protest; the vice chancellor wasn’t available, the Dean made a sheepish exit when I confronted him in the VC’s office. As usual the VC is flitting about

elsewhere, but I have been recommended to loiter around a funding conference held by the Roundtable, in the tourist area, with a view to speak to him; I am far more tempted to make a presentation to the Roundtable to recommend refusing to support his next funding request as he appears to hold no value to the offered support of NGOs. The college/ university needs sports facilities, not a hall for them to use once a year at graduation on a campus that they know is only a temporary home(they have an intended 'home' further up country). Controversial as that may be, another VSO veteran who I met for the first time at the Education conference has claimed the best way to operate here is not to wait with a 'slowly,slowly' approach but rather 'do it, then beg for forgiveness afterwards'. It would appear that is the way the VC thinks; I should have set fire to the fields of crops last November to move my development to a point of *fait accompli*. I may get some more direction and support if I can get to see the Minister of Sport and Youth though the PE lecturer at college; I made his day by offering to deliver Rugby to the 450 Primary students now I have the loan of some resources.

Saturday morning was sett-settal, we did our laundry early again to get out of the house and 'moved' before the lock down began. On this occasion it was to a local school where the *Smile* gang were holding a morning school of activities, games and fundamental teachings of their Christian faith for the local children. With Denise warning me not to take over the efforts of the gang; I wasn't tempted really I did find myself in a somewhat 'head masterly' role patrolling the corridors trying to keep things quiet for the teams in their classrooms. The main issues were some young brothers and sisters believing their siblings shouldn't be learning about Christianity when they were Muslims; it was hard trying to explain the historical connection of Christianity and Islam to children with no conversational English and that they were in no danger (meanwhile the white man talking to you had hair on his arms to pull at!). *Smile* had also provided lunch for the participants; this provided a further organisational nightmare as further children in the locality tried to force their way in to get food; the younger children had no respect for any order as they pushed and shoved their way to the front of a queue; I ended up stood amongst them picking up and sidelining any that were inflicting discomfort on others. I now have some idea of what it must be like to provide aid to starving crowds; the sad thing is that these kids are relatively well fed.

One of the lads is a Portsmouth fan so I joined him in the afternoon to watch the FA cup final. I hoped we would find a video club full of Chelsea supporting Gambians to bait with our support of the underdog. It wasn't to be; the anti-Chelsea mob was as numerous as the Chelsea supporters and thankfully the crowd was small. I won't forget the afternoon- the widescreen projector was good for here but the room/shack was baking- corrugated iron roofs are not good in the middle of the afternoon and would be worse with greater numbers.

I feel, again, I have little to report for the week – no great adventures or trials. I have, however, learned that I can be a Manager more than the manager I have here (but I also learnt from one of his contemporaries that he trained to be a teacher without committing to the cause, instead, using the qualification to further his career prospects in administration. As a result he is a poor advocate for the teachers I am training, when perhaps a third are only after a qualification to emulate his career path.)I have also learned that the Gambia has been found, in a recent survey, to have more funding support from NGOs than any other country in the world. That the rugby 'team', that is supposed to exist alongside the Serrekunda team I have been working with, doesn't really exist- it had been suggested we visit Bakau to train with them this week; they didn't show up. Next week I hope to improve the fortunes of a community project on the North Bank with a local tourist operation, something I hope will be more sustainable than my perceived need for sport! As we prepare to say good-bye to a further group of volunteers from *Smile* I note we are 3/8 ths of our way through the placement so I will have more farewells to make; those of you who know me well know how difficult I find saying 'good-bye'.