

RE: visiting Madagascar

An update six months
after Madagascar 2012



It starts with Scouts.

Tout commence
avec les Scouts.

INTRODUCTION

It's been six months now since we were in Madagascar, working together in the heat, facing new challenges every day. We've all settled back into our normal lives now, although slightly different than who we were six months ago. A project like this, for many (if not all) of us, was the most important thing we've ever done. It's impossible to walk away at the end and not be a different person. We look at the world just a little bit differently now. Cups of coffee symbolize the possibility of friendship. Cookies are always *Nice* – even if it doesn't say so on the label. We're tempted to lie down and take a couple of hours off in the afternoon for a nap. Hot showers are glorious. We're more grateful than ever to be able to walk through the streets and not choke our throats in dust, or have to step over garbage (and chickens).

This package is to show you the lasting impact this project has had. Six months after we were there, the project continues to grow, and continues to change (much like it did while we were in Madagascar)! One of the biggest changes is that the dormitory building has actually been converted into a school. When the girls started to arrive at the dormitory to begin their school, their whole extended families expected to stay with them. Sylvia quickly realized this would not be viable, nor would it be secure for the girls. The decision was made by the community to turn it into a free public school for grades 4-6. We only learned of this change in the last month, but I think we can all agree that this is a very exciting prospect: being able to touch so many more lives than we had originally expected. Indeed, as you read through these pages, you'll see that those three weeks have had a lasting impact on more than just us, or the Troisième quartier, but the entire village of Ambato Boeni, and beyond!

As you wander back in your imagination to Ambato Boeni, take a few moments to reflect on all that has happened, and all that we accomplished. Not just in the school, or the washroom facility. Think back on the pre-camp, on all your preparations and fundraising. Think back on the challenges and difficulties that we overcame when we literally moved mountains to complete this project. We've all changed: Contingent members, our supporters and the people of Ambato Boeni alike. Live this difference every day. Let Madagascar 2012 be only a beginning.

“It is the belief of the people of Ambato Boeni that their future mayor is now learning at their new school”

-Fr. Alfredo Ramanadraibe



Iain



THE PEACEFUL DWELLING SCHOOL

You may be asking what happened to the dorm exactly. Here's the story from Fr. Alfredo. When Sylvia went to help the girls move into the dormitory, she found that they had arrived in Ambato Boeni not only with all their things, but also with all their family...their extended family. Sylvia attempted to figure out a way to make this work. She started doing sleeping arrangements, trying to make sure families stayed together. But she soon realized that the only way to accommodate everyone would mean that there could very easily be male relatives sleeping in the same room as other female students. She did not feel that she could guarantee the safety and security of the girls in the dormitory.

Ambato Boeni and the Troisième quartier started looking at what they could do. When the public school in the first quarter by the church was turned into a private school, they had an answer. Most students were no longer able to attend the school because they could not afford tuition. So, the "Peaceful Dwelling" (dormitory had been named this in Malagasy) became a school for grades 4 – 6. There are now 150 students at the school (yes, 50 students in each classroom)! In the village, it has been said many times now that the future mayor of Ambato Boeni is likely being educated at this school right now.

Also, as an added bit of information, the teachers at the school are currently being paid by a donor in Mahajagna, which will continue until the school is able to support the teachers itself (see a bit further on to find out how)!

But the changes and updates go far, far beyond just this!!



THE UPDATES

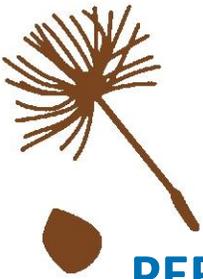
Let's begin with where we left off. The floor of the school has been completed! It was laid not long after we left, just as Ambato Boeni promised it would be. The shade, where we ate our lunches, was finished of course, but it was also converted into a type of hostel for families of students. While this still wasn't considered enough to guarantee the safety of the girls in the dormitory, it has helped to ensure that there is a place for families of students to stay if needed.

What's really exciting is the new use of the washroom facility. Yes, of course it's still a washroom and shower. It's hard to get around the fact that there are toilets everywhere. But because of the way it was built (like a fortress), it has been identified as the shelter for the school if there were a cyclone or other natural disaster. Not only that, but because of the coating on the walls, the shower stalls will be used as a birthing room for the village's mothers as it can be more easily sanitized than most other places in the village!

One of the other parts of the project, something that we had hoped to be able to do, was the wall around the campus. While we weren't able to do that part of the project while we were there, it has also been completed now! It's a bit of a monstrous campus! It stretches from the shade where we ate lunch in the east, to the banks of the Betsiboka, to the shed where we kept the tools in the south, to the fence where the dogs kept coming through to the north. It's made of wood for now, but it helps to separate the space from public use while school is going on.

While the wall may be keeping the public out during the day, in the evening, at 5pm, the area is opened up to the public so that they can get fresh water from the two wells (both wells that Scouts Canada sponsored in 2009 are contained within the campus walls). There's a long line up every day, giving everyone an opportunity for fresh water and continued good health.





PERSONAL PROFILE: THE STUDENT



When we first heard about the change to the dormitory, one of the questions we had right away was “what will happen to the girls?” We were concerned that the girls who had been all set to move in and go to school would be forgotten once again.

You remember the girl that we met by the toll bridge? She lived with her mother in a small house where they sold bananas. Fr. Alfredo had told us that she would be one of the girls at the school. Well, she still is. But the way that she was able to attend the school may surprise you! When it became apparent that the building would not be a dormitory, an unlikely group of women stepped forward to help out this girl: the lunch ladies! The women who made and provided lunch to us each day have taken this girl into their home, along with her family, so that she can still go to school. She works with them in the evenings after she is finished her schooling too, gaining work experience that will serve her well when she graduates.

This is not an unusual story now, as you will see. The community is really rallying around this project and is helping to support the girls that were supposed to be staying at the dormitory. Instead of losing 24 students who would have stayed at the dormitory, they’re still going to school, but now 126 additional students are able to go to school, too!



WHEELBARROWS FULL OF MONEY



One thing that we all will have noticed in Ambato Boeni is the ability the people there have to make something out of nothing. In this case, the school was able to take the wheelbarrows we had been using and turn them into a business. While we saw old, broken down wheelbarrows (some of which didn't even have wheels anymore), the school saw an opportunity. They are now renting these wheelbarrows out to the community to bring in money to support the school. One thing they would like to do with this money is set up a food garden that can help to feed the students, but also will be an additional source of income to pay teachers and maintain the school and campus!

PERSONAL PROFILE: THE LUNCH LADIES

Here's a great story! The lunch ladies who prepared and provided our lunch each day were able to save up some of the money we gave them for groceries to start their own business. They run a restaurant/catering service that focuses on higher-end food. The thought was that they can now offer a type of food not available anywhere else in the village.

Their hope is that their food will further entice outside politicians and businessmen to come and visit the village. It is also serving as an inspiration not only to the community, but to girls in particular, that they can start their own business and think outside the village. Amazing!



LIFE, LEARNING AND LIGHT!



We all felt the heat and saw the sun reflecting off the walls of the Peaceful Dwelling, but who could have expected that it would be able to have an impact all on its own!

Across the Betsiboka river and up the hill is another small village. The village priest there, Fr. Gilbert, used to be the priest in Ambato Boeni. He was moved shortly after our first visit to the village in 2008. Shortly after we completed the project this summer, his parishioners began coming to him, asking what the light across the river was. They didn't know what could be causing it. He explained to him that it was actually the sun reflecting off the new school in Ambato Boeni. Then he told them about the project and about how this group of Canadians came half-way around the world to work on this project, like they promised they would. Now, we've learned that the village across the river is starting to work on their own project similar to the work done in Ambato Boeni. They see the benefit of working together, and of education, and all it took was a bright light coming across the river.



PERSONAL PROFILE: THE MAMA



There were many mamas throughout the project. There was the site mama, there was Sylvia, who became the school mama, and there was Iain's mama (as Fr. Alfredo called her), whom he met in 2008. After spending nearly a year sick in bed and in hospital, in and out of a coma, she has miraculously recovered. She has been going to the seashore in Mahajanga just to breathe in the fresh air. She credits her recovery to our project and the fact that it showed not only that Ambato Boeni had not been forgotten, but that she had not been forgotten either. That we came back to fulfill the promise we made to her. She's excited to see what future projects take place in the village!



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



So what's next for Ambato Boeni? Almost anything! Fr. Alfredo has reported that this project really has opened up the eyes of the people who live in the village. They're thinking forward, they're thinking outside the community. They're considering, for the first time, what the future will look like. This project has shown them that there are things that are so much bigger than any one person and that by working together towards them, anything is possible.

We've learned that they will be starting up a Scout troop in the village. Now there are already Scouts there, but this Troop will be a non-denominational one, meaning anyone at all can join! Many of the people we met on the worksite mentioned that they would really like to be involved in scouting, but because they aren't Christian, it makes it very difficult to join a group. It's very exciting to think about what this new Troop will be able to do!

One of the biggest challenges in getting this project going was trying to get people to buy into it in Ambato Boeni. Even on the Thursday before dedicating the site, people still did not believe that it could be completed. Nothing like this had ever been done before. But now, now that they've seen that a project like this is possible, the village now knows not only that it can trust Scouts Canada, but that they can trust themselves to take on larger projects for the betterment of their own community.

Before Fr. Alfredo returned to Canada for his studies, he was in Ambato Boeni again and was starting to see what support there would be for another project. People were ecstatic. He found nothing but support throughout the village. People were committing to contribute a bag of cement or a day's use of zebu for free, to help with future efforts. They are working together for their own community for the first time and we have all had a hand in this. We have done great work, but just as it is only the beginning in Ambato Boeni, let's make sure it is only a beginning for ourselves as well. While many of us may not end up back in Ambato Boeni any time soon, we can take what we have learned and what we have experienced to continue to change the world, even if it's just one brick at a time.





*On our honour,
we promised*



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**Tout commence
avec les Scouts.**