



MY JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

Visiting Rohey Jatta in The Gambia, November 2009

All rights reserved – John Baatjes 2010



My journey started in Auckland on the 1st November from a sunny Auckland. I boarded a plane that took me through some of the most opulent cities in the world to visit my ChildFund sponsored child, Rohey Jatta, in West African nation of The Gambia.



I thought about the contrasts I would face as I traveled across China, through Europe that was fast approaching winter, across the deserts of North Africa, to the tropical heat of West Africa. I knew I'd be experiencing something I'd never forget





My visit to Rohey started with a pick up from my motel and the first stop was the Child Fund offices in Banjul. Here I met the staff and people like Nfamara Dabo who assisted in the arrangements for my visit.

I learned that I was the first New Zealander to visit The Gambia and everyone was very pleased to receive a visitor from so far away. There are over 15,000 children being cared for by ChildFund in The Gambia but the need is far greater than this. With incomes so low there is little money left over from the buying basic necessities of life for the needs of education. The key is therefore to get children sponsored with education that can start them on a road out of the cycle of poverty.



The next leg of the visit was to visit the local office that took care of the people in the vicinity of the local office. People living in the village can easily ask for help if immediate needs arise. Records are kept of all correspondence and the office workers assist the children with their letters to sponsors.

From the local office we went to Rohey's school where she was taking a mathematics class as part of her skills development that will assist her in finding a job once she left school. The school is facing a funding shortage in the new year and I hope that this facility will not need to increase their fees to make up for the shortfall in funding.



The school provides facilities such as Sewing classes, Computer skills, English Language classes and Mathematics.



The environment is very basic but the teachers are committed to providing the best for their students and are visibly proud of their assignments.



This was my first time that I saw Rohey in person and I recognised her immediately. Rohey is now 19 years old and I have been sponsoring her since 2000 so she's part of my family. I don't have any children of my own and as someone also born in Africa, I felt the need to sponsor a child somewhere in Africa.



As this was an important visit we were allowed to disrupted Rohey's class and took her to her village.

Along the way we could see that the living conditions of people in the area are very poor.

Everyone is doing what they can to survive and earn a living so there is a great need to give people a hand-up, not a hand-out, to make a difference in their lives.

I trust that Rohey will graduate from the class in order to get a good job to help her family.



We arrived on land where three extended family homes are situated. The cooking and living areas are very basic and there is a great need to get the families into earning a living or growing a family garden.

Rohey's dad has been out of work for 2 years so I would like to do something to put him into a position to start his own business. He showed me photos of what he did as a welder and I feel that if he could be given a loan to start a home-based business then it could change things for the entire family group.

Even though there is great poverty there is a resilience amongst the people of The Gambia and I can see that my support is making a difference not only to Rohey but to her family. Once Rohey gets a job then I will sponsor another one of the children to get them through school and in that way the next child will be assured of a better future.



It was a real coincidence to learn that one of Rohey's friends is also sponsored by a Kiwi so New Zealanders are making a real difference around the world by supporting various charities such as ChildFund.



It was a special visit to bring some fun and laughter into the lives of the family with some unique gifts from New Zealand and to help improve the daily lives of the family by changing their circumstances to bring relief to their situation.





My visit to Rohey ended too soon and it was time to say goodbye. This is the saddest part of a visit like this and I had to wish them all of the best for their future. I returned to my motel thinking that I was making a difference but that there was so much more to be done!

We are fortunate that our currencies are stronger and in that way we can bless others by giving something away to change the lives of one person. We will never truly know what difference we have made but there is a whole chain of people we will help by our generosity.

I was saddened by some aspects of my visit but hopeful that we CAN make a difference. It only takes action by one person to make a positive difference in people's lives.

It is a great privilege for me to share my story from the comfort of New Zealand and I hope that it will spur many more people on to do the same.

