

CULTURAL IMMERSION TRIP TO SENEGAL, WEST AFRICA (March 4-14, 2014)

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We left the Rivier campus for Logan Airport in the wee hours of the morning of March 4, 2014. It was frigidly cold and dark that morning. We would be travelling to a very different place; different in many ways from our home. The students were excited and a little apprehensive. Our group that morning consisted of four RN-BS students (Alyssa Bradley, Caleigh Bertolaccini, Kathryn LaBatte, and Rebecca Narkunas), an FNP student (Sara Hartman), and me, Susan Feeney. These wonderful young women boarded the plane in Boston and never looked back. They knew things would be different but had no concept of what this transformation would entail. They took a leap of faith and love by boarding the plane that morning. They brought shoes, surgical scrubs, stethoscopes, t-shirts, and baby clothes to leave behind but they brought so much more back with them. They brought new friendships and memories back with them in their nearly empty suitcases. We felt the pull of the comfort of home against the desire to be with our new friends and the beauty and harsh realities that is West Africa and the Third World.



We arrived in Dakar, Senegal, and were greeted by Dr. Mark Meehan and Sister Mary, from the Presentation of Mary Convent in Dakar. We spent the next 12 hours walking the city, tired and jet lagged but determined to see everything. The students were surprised to see the modern bustling city with so many people hurriedly going to their destinations. We spent time with the Sisters (Sisters Mary, Maree, Marie Therese, and Janette) who embraced and cared for us at the Convent. The children who attend the Presentation of Mary School sang to us in English and French.



On our second day we travelled to Goree Island. This is one of the islands on the coast of West Africa that was integral to the slave trade. It was an emotional visit and a stark reminder of the presence of horror, injustice and inhumanity that exists. That evening we boarded a boat for an overnight trip down the coast of Senegal to Ziguinchor. We saw dolphins swimming by the boat and beautiful wet

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lands along the Casamance River. We arrived in Ziguinchor to a throng of people – merchants, taxi cab drivers, and fellow travelers. I was amazed at how well the students took the experience in their stride. We were met by Sisters Emma and Madeleine. They are best described by the following: joy, laughter, strength, and grace.



They took us to the inn or “auberge” “La Promese” where we would be staying for the remainder of our visit to Ziguinchor. By the time we left we knew our way around the bustling town and found everyone to be friendly and warm, willing to help and kind.





One afternoon, we visited Affiniam where Sister Emma's PM Community is located. Dr Meehan and Sister Emma arranged for us to take a boat trip to Affiniam. We all felt that it was a highlight of the trip. The experience of floating past the pristine scenery, dolphins who accompanied our large canoe for part of the trip, beautiful birds, too numerous to count, will remain one of the most wonderful memories of my life. Sister Annee met us at the dock in Affiniam and took us to the Convent there. We visited the clinic where Sister Annee had just help deliver baby Suzanne and the day before, a beautiful set of healthy twin girls. We then visited the school and several classrooms. The children sang to us and we were overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration for these young students and their dedicated teachers.





We spent three days visiting The Regional Hospital in Ziguinchor. We were in awe of the work done by the healthcare professionals at this hospital. Compared to the technology and abundance of supplies we are accustomed to in the U.S., they have relatively little to assist them in their delivery of care. We saw such dedication and a level of team work that was exemplary. It is something U.S. healthcare could benefit from and should aspire to. These clinicians must rely on their physical exam skills and diagnostic reasoning to determine what is happening to their patients. We were reminded of how important these skills are and that not every presentation requires a scan or an x-ray.





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We experienced sadness as well. We saw people succumb to infections and illnesses that are commonly and simply treated here at home. We saw a fragile and incomplete healthcare infrastructure that is struggling to meet the needs of its people. There were harsh realities which we are still contemplating and reacting to. Our hosts were open and generous with their knowledge and skills. As Dr Edwards, Chief of the “Urgency” Department said to me “We have nothing here in the hospital. We do the best we can with the little we have. In Dakar the emergency room has everything you would want. Not here in Ziguinchor.” It left us with more questions than answers. “How can we help and what can we do?” we all asked ourselves. What is essential to good quality care? I have no doubt that these questions will inspire these students who spent their spring break in Senegal. They will take this experience and it will transform their nursing practice. Although we have many questions, we do know this — we made wonderful friends and connections in Senegal and that we learned so much more from these wonderful clinicians than we could ever teach them.





We were decidedly transformed when we returned on March 14, 2014. We still had the red dirt of Senegal on our shoes and on our clothes. We still carried with us the strong smells of the pungent aromatic Senegalese spices as well the smell of burning rubbish that is everywhere in the town of Ziguinchor, Senegal. In Senegal time seems to run slower. You have time to sense the world and the people in it. It is not all pleasant. All of it is part of life. I will be forever grateful to the Sisters, the Doctors, the Nurses, and the people of Senegal who showed me that life is about family, friends, and community. It is about faith, joy, laughter, and where you are in this moment. I cannot wait until I return and bring more students ready to embrace transformation, whatever it brings. ■

* **SUSAN FEENEY, MS, RN, APRN, NP-C, FNP-BC**, is an Assistant Professor with the Division of Nursing at Rivier University. Susan received a Bachelor's Degree in Developmental Psychology from McGill University and then received a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing from Texas Woman's University. She worked primarily as maternal-child care nurse in intrapartum units for many years in both academic medical centers and community facilities. She held a position at Tufts New England Medical Center as the Unit Educator of their High Risk Intra-partum Unit. Ms. Feeney received a Masters in Science in Nursing (Family Nurse Practitioner track) from the University of New Hampshire in 1983, and has been providing primary care to families since then. Ms. Feeney is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Nursing Practice at University of Massachusetts Boston, recently defending her doctoral proposal for the capstone project. Her passion to teach nurses led her to Rivier University, where she has taught graduate nursing students since 2004. In 2012, she became Director of Graduate Nursing Education within the Division of Nursing.