

IN MALI



The Gift of a Lifetime

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As I slipped the new pair of running shoes onto my host's calloused feet, adrenaline surged through my body. Even though I had anticipated and imagined this scene many times over, I was still overcome by the joy of giving these shoes to the dignified elder Chief of Sikoro, a tiny and impoverished village in Mali, West Africa. My hands trembled. My heartbeat raced.

The scene unfolded a few days

after Christmas 2009. I had traveled to Sikoro with eleven fellow University of Southern California students on a three-week humanitarian trip through the USC African Health Initiative. Our mission included building an irrigated "Community Garden" to enrich the 500 villagers' diets with fruits and vegetables as well as using funds we raised to purchase building materials for a desperately needed bridge. Dur-

ing the rainy season, the nearby river floods, leaving Sikoro isolated from all schools, all commerce and, often tragically, all medical services.

Less drastically, but no less well-intentioned, I brought along 113 pairs of running shoes – as many as I could squeeze into five extra duffel bags – to give out to the villagers.

Three years prior, as a student at Ventura High School, I founded "Give

Running" to collect, clean, and donate new and used running shoes to disadvantaged youth. This original holiday project with a modest goal of 100 pairs of shoes has snowballed into an official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization (www.giverunning.org) that has distributed more than 8,600 pairs of running shoes to underprivileged kids – or, more accurately, children with no privileges at all – near and far, from inner-city Los Angeles to indigent villages and orphanages in Third-World nations including Kenya, Liberia, Uganda, Sudan, as well as earthquake victims in Haiti.

Sikoro, however, was the first time outside of California that I was able to carry out our motto in person: "Give opportunity. Give joy. Give Running." As is often the case when one gives to others, I found I received so much more in return. I am so thankful for the opportunity I had to visit Sikoro.

Mali ranks as the third-poorest nation in the world, but to me it seemed like its people must rank among the happiest. To an outsider from the Western world, this is at first surprising if not downright perplexing. After all, the villagers in Sikoro live in mud-brick huts; they sleep on woven mats on hard-dirt floors; they pump their water – *ji* in Bambara, their native language – from two wells. And, as mentioned, they lack enough fruits and vegetables, adequate medical care, and year-round schooling.

While living what seems a difficult life, theirs seems a happy existence; they smile constantly, laugh easily, and dance freely. Worries about car payments and mortgages and pension accounts and work promotions do not weigh on their minds. They don't have much by our standards, but they have enough – and most importantly, what they have they graciously share. *Dumuni* (food), especially *sogo* (meat), is in short supply, yet the villagers slaughtered a *ba* (goat) to treat us to a celebratory feast.

In return I could not wait to *djan* (give) them the gift of running shoes. Unfortunately, our USCAHI group's luggage was lost on our connecting flight from Paris. Over the next week the rest of our

group's luggage trickled in...but not mine. For two weeks I made do with the clothes on my back, an inconvenience that would have been infuriating had I not taken to heart Coach John Wooden's wisdom: "Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out."

Indeed, I embraced the turn of events as it allowed me to more fully relate to, and appreciate, the people of Sikoro because for a brief while I was living with almost as few possessions as they did. Still, I was worried sick that the five duffel bags filled with running shoes would not be found.

At long last the duffel bags arrived and my dream of handing out the running shoes was realized. Recalling it still gives me goose bumps. For many of the Sikoro villagers, these were the first shoes they have ever had! Indeed, so precious were the shoes that if we at first guessed wrong and gave a person shoes that were too small, he or she would crunch up their toes and insist they fit just fine. Having painfully small shoes was better than having none at all; they would not let us take them off their feet until we brought over a larger replacement pair.

As special as was honoring the Chief with the first pair of running shoes, lacing up each pair on the other recipients' feet was equally touching. However, one gift pair stands out in my mind and heart as distinctly as does the greatest run of my life.

The day before leaving Sikoro, I went on a six-mile run through the village. The first few laps of my quarter-mile loop I ran in solitude, but then several children began to run with me. They would keep me company for one or two circuits, then drop out and take a rest, only to rejoin me the next time I came around. Before I knew it, my running group had swelled from three to ten to twenty-plus smiling kids – many of who were wearing the gift shoes they had recently received.

During this most memorable run of my life, one training partner stood out because he had to stop – not from exhaustion, but because there was a rocky section of the trail and he was running barefoot. Lameen Sacko, I learned, had not received a pair of Give Running shoes the day before. The following day, my last in the vil-

lage, I met this teen at his tin-roofed mud hut and asked him to try on my pair of running shoes – the only pair of shoes (besides flip-flops) I had brought for my own use in Mali.

My Adidas SuperNova Glides fit Lameen perfectly. "I ni che. A madou (Thank you, Greg)," he said, using my adopted Malian name.

"I ni su (You are welcome)," I replied, smiling.

As we shook hands in friendship, adrenaline again surged through my body and my heart again raced. I realized how each pair of Give Running shoes handed out serves as a bridge between two people. While the giver and receiver of each pair of shoes may not meet face-to-face as Lameen and I did, through the shoes they nevertheless meet "foot-to-foot."

Visiting Africa, I found, breaks your heart – and opens it wider than ever before. I am certainly a better and more fulfilled person for the experience.

This past holiday season, amongst all the bounty, I thought of the special dinner I was treated to in Sikoro. I gave thanks for all that I have, and all that I learned from those who have so much less. As I laced up my new Adidas to go for a run, I also thought of Lameen. **BT**

