



Satang Sallah, the first Gambian girl to receive a Kona AfricaBike from HopeFirst Foundation, sets off from Medina Wallom to her village five kilometers away.



Spotlight on Sandy Murray RN

A travel medicine nurse for over a decade, Sandy Murray has volunteered her services for health clinics in Darfur, Sudan; earthquake relief in Haiti; and HopeFirst Foundation projects in The Gambia-- this year alone. She is typically abroad for upwards of two months each year and credits her patients for inspiring her interest in global medicine and opening the door to The Gambia.

"As a travel nurse, I met a wonderful former Peace Corp volunteer, who came to my clinic each year for shots before visiting The Gambia," she reflects. "I began to help her with fundraising efforts for humanitarian projects there. One thing led to another and I ended up traveling to The Gambia with her four years in a row. After spending a significant amount of time in this developing West African country, we honed in on one very obvious need: the education of girls."

Seattle Women Help Gambian Girls Pedal Their Way to a Better Life

by Lori Hinton

"Hand me that pedal wrench," smiles Sandy Murray, wiping her brow while assembling one of 225 Kona AfricaBikes in 110-degree heat at a remote school in The Gambia's up country village of Medina Wallom.

Murray, an emergency room nurse and Medical Teams International volunteer, and industrial hygienist Barbara Trenary have traveled to this West African country on multiple occasions for humanitarian work, but this year marked the beginning of an incredible ride.

What brought these Seattle women and a handful of volunteers all the way to The Gambia some 8,000 miles away? A chance to help break the cycle of illiteracy in Gambian girls.

How? By assembling hundreds of ultra durable Africa-specific bicycles for kids to use as transportation to school— thanks to fundraising efforts from local non-profit HopeFirst Foundation www.hopefirst.org and Kona Basic Needs www.konabasicneeds.org.

The Impact of Educating Girls

In an ideal world, every child has the opportunity to go to school. HopeFirst Foundation's goal is to see every girl get the chance to learn. While this sounds simple on paper, the reality is, in fact, very complex. However, when achievable, the impact a girl's education has on her country is world changing.

According to four years of rigorous studies by the Nike Foundation, when you improve a girl's life, many more lives benefit—from her family and friends' to entire communities. As educated daughters, sisters and mothers, women can help break the cycle of poverty.

EVIDENCE SHOWS:

- When girls receive seven or more years of education, they marry four years later and have 2.2 fewer children.
- When 10 percent more girls attend secondary school, the country's economy grows by 3 percent.
- When an educated girl earns income, she reinvests 90 percent in her family.
- When women gain the skills necessary to participate in public life, government corruption declines.

For more information on what the Nike Foundation refers to as "The Girl Effect," visit: www.nikefoundation.org/index.html



Village girls grind grain, a physically demanding chore that can keep them from attending school.



Preparing meals for family is another part of village girls' daily duties.



HopeFirst Foundation's goal is to see every girl get the chance to learn.

Sights Set on Gambian Girls

Surrounded by Senegal on the West African Coast (also known as the Smiling Coast), The Gambia is Africa's smallest country with just over 4,000 square miles and a population of 1.66 million.¹ It's ranked in the lowest 25% of world economies with over 60% of the population living below the poverty line.² The majority of Gambians live on less than \$1-2 per day. The capital of Banjul offers some modern amenities, but once the black top ends, the villages that make up most of the country are without resources that the West takes for granted. Most lack water, food, healthcare, schools, and enterprise.

The Gambia suffers from some of the lowest literacy rates on the African continent with just over 60% literacy in young adult males and only 40% literacy in females.³ Education is available to all, in theory, but girls tend to be sent to school last and often drop out early due to financial hardship and the obligation to help at home—from countless hours of grain grinding and carrying water to finding firewood, caring for younger children and preparing food. These responsibilities, in addition to living far distances from middle and secondary schools, make attending and completing school extremely difficult (it's not uncommon for schools to be 10-12 miles way from any given village).

"The girls' chores are non-negotiable so it's difficult to break the cycle; this is an integral part of their culture," explains Murray.

"But the girls in The Gambia have what it takes to succeed—the work ethic, the drive, the ability, and the smarts," says Trenary. "They just lack the opportunity."

"Studies show that once women are educated, they become the change makers in their own society," explains Murray. "Our goal in The Gambia is to promote opportunity for women by removing barriers to the education of girls."

The need was obvious. With no buses or public transit, transportation to school was the missing link for children who live too far to walk. Transportation could mean the chance to learn for all children—girls and boys alike.

1. World Health Statistics 2008
2. Integrated Household Survey 2003/04
3. 2003 Census Education Statistics Report



After journeying from Indonesia to West Africa via container ship, the Kona AfricaBikes finally arrived.



Every man, woman and child in the village offered to help unload bikes.



HopeFirst Foundation volunteers assemble the first of 225 bikes in a Medina Wallom schoolroom.



German volunteer Johannes Wolf helps teach a Jurunku village girl to ride an AfricaBike



The arrival of Kona's bike boxes created almost as much excitement as the bicycles for the children of Medina Wallom.

Enter AfricaBikes

You could say serendipity was responsible for how bicycles rolled into the picture next. After contemplating on how to improve Gambian girls' education, Murray contemplated how a bike can turn a two hour walk into a half hour ride, providing time for school and family so kids don't have to choose one or the other. Her idea for bikes as a means to break down barriers to education was further cultivated during a conversation about Africa with a patient at the UWMC Travel Medicine Clinic who suggested she check out Kona's AfricaBike program.

"This program started in 2006 when *Bicycling Magazine* approached Kona to provide bikes for healthcare workers delivering HIV Antiviral drugs in Africa," explains Russell Carty, Kona Basic Needs Project Director. "Our mission is to use Kona AfricaBikes to help provide transport, shelter, food and water to those with difficulty in attaining them."

To date, Kona's donated upwards of 3,500 AfricaBikes, 469 of which will reach Malawi, Rwanda, and the Gambia this year alone.

Kona's AfricaBikes are made of durable steel with an integrated back rack and basket—designed for the conditions of riding African terrain. They are built with a single speed (no gearing) and simple pedal back foot breaks so that they're low maintenance and easy to fix.



Alpha Jallow, Lori Hinton, Ismaila Cham and Satang Sallah use teamwork to build bikes.

"The Kona AfricaBike is like a Land Rover," grins the group's Gambian driver, mechanic and local expert Alpha Jallow. "They're sturdy and made to last forever, if you take care of them. Whoever designed these is a genius."

The idea for two-wheeled student transportation resurfaced when Wallom Jallow, the village elder of Medina Wallom (with whom HopeFirst Foundation works on other projects), presented a proposal requesting over 100 bikes for area children to ride to school. His goal was to send more kids to school but the



Satang Sallah, the first female bike recipient, fills out her Kona AfricaBike application.



Each student is awarded a bike key on lanyards donated by The Boeing Company.



Sallah tests out the seat height of the first fully assembled AfricaBike.

problem was getting them there. Assisting Gambians at the village level based on requests from village leaders, HopeFirst Foundation's path to the next project was clear: Raise money, deliver, and build bikes for Gambian kids to pedal their way toward education, and ultimately a better life. Soon thereafter, the non-profit began a massive organizing and fundraising effort.

"Based on consultation with village elders and school headmasters, we knew the village schools had to control the distribution and maintenance of the bikes (versus individual ownership) in order for this to be a sustainable project," explains Trenary. "Transparency is assured via local community committees who oversee the administration of the bike program."

To qualify for the use of Kona AfricaBikes, each school submits applications for an equal numbers of girls and boys. Students must be at least 12 years old (big enough to ride these adult bikes) and live a minimum of 5 kilometers from school. Students are also required to deposit a small annual maintenance fee. The bicycles are distributed to the qualifying students at the beginning of the school year (recording serial numbers for accountability), returned at the end of the year, and securely stored for the summer.

"We have worked on projects with WWF in Tanzania and Peace Warriors in Kenya. When we heard of the HopeFirst project, we felt it really fit our goal of how Kona Africabikes can be used to make a difference while showing potential for taking an already successful program in an exciting new direction."

Kona committed, and alas, the program had wheels. For every two bikes that HopeFirst Foundation raised funds, Kona donated a third. In total, 225 donated bikes made their way via container ship from the factory in Indonesia all the way to the port of Banjul in The Gambia, just in time to be trucked up country and built before the school year began.

"In the 11th hour our shipping donation fell through and Kona heroically stepped in to cover shipping costs. Kona went above and beyond their already huge commitment; they were instrumental in making this program a success," explains Murray.



The first row of Kona AfricaBikes lines the school room walls in the village of Medina Wallom.

About HopeFirst Foundation

Founded in 2006, HopeFirst Foundation's mission is to promote partnership in health, education, and cultural exchange to support the well-being of women and children in low-resource settings. The nonprofit was originally created to address the needs of vulnerable children in Zimbabwe, and expanded its reach to The Gambia in 2008, when Sandy Murray and Barbara Trenary approached co-founders Kim Foley and Diana Chamrad.

In addition to the Kona AfricaBikes program, HopeFirst Foundation initiated the following projects during the September 2010 trip to The Gambia:

Engineers Without Borders Pedal-Powered Grain Mill

A pedal-powered grain mill was designed, engineered and delivered to the village of Medina Wallom. Designers Tim Johnson and Ben Blainedavis of Engineers Without Borders created this mill to help decrease the time girls spend grinding grain by hand—a time-consuming chore that keeps girls from focusing on studies. These mills were designed for manufacture in The Gambia to be made and sold locally.



Engineer Tim Johnson demonstrates the use of his pedal-powered grain mill.

Nana Clinic Improvements

A solar panel and cell phone charging station were installed at the medical clinic in the village of Nana, near Medina Wallom. The clinic now has lights for nighttime baby deliveries and other medical services as well as an income from residents who charge their cell phones at the clinic. A large supply of medical supplies was also donated and delivered. Volunteers Julie Cohen San Clemente and Allison Trenary spearheaded the project.



Girls in the village of Jurunku learn to ride bikes for the first time, with the help of village boys.

The Result

The smiles on each Gambian child's face say more than words can describe. And the eight volunteers who built the bikes while experiencing a new culture, agree the reward of knowing you are helping kids get an education is immeasurable.

"For me, it's all about helping create a better balance of resources," describes volunteer Julie Cohen San Clemente of Mill Creek. "Offering the bikes as a means for kids to learn was a great way to help spread those resources in an effort to make the world a more balanced place."

The long-term results of this program are yet to be determined, but HopeFirst Foundation saw promising signs of success during the mere three weeks the group was in country.

"We've already seen a huge increase in the number of kids who want to attend school due to the bicycle program," beams Murray. "And in the village of Jurunku, we actually witnessed village boys willingly teaching village girls how to ride a bike for the first time. The girls need the support of boys (and the support of their entire village) to make this program succeed, so this is a step in the right direction."

"The last day [in Jurunku] goes down as one of the best days of my life," Trenary adds. "These girls hunkered down to learn how to use tools and assemble the bikes. Then they hiked up their skirts, hopped on, and learned to ride, right in front of our eyes. Seeing their faces light up at the fact that these bikes were for them, and that they had the equal opportunity to use them to learn was nothing short of joyous. I am so proud of these girls."

It is just the beginning, but in a way, HopeFirst Foundation is using the bicycle as a vehicle for change in The Gambia. To help break the cycle of poverty also improves the health, welfare and economy of the whole nation.

More HopeFirst Foundation Projects in The Gambia

Bed Nets to Prevent Malaria

Sewing machines were donated by Barbara Trenary and delivered at the request of the women in Medina Wallom, enabling them to start a business to support themselves and their families. In addition to other income-generating projects, sewing mosquito netting to prevent malaria infection is a priority project.

Treadle Water Pump

Headed up by Marion Cloutier, plans to introduce a treadle water pump through kickstart.org are currently in the works. This pump will decrease the amount of time girls spend carrying water to irrigate the gardens.

Mill Creek Elementary Book Donation

Through the efforts of Julie Cohen San Clemente and her son Jacob, over 1000 children's books were collected by children at Mill Creek Elementary and delivered to their counterparts in The Gambia. Even something so simple as giving a child a book makes a big difference.

Net Book Donation

Three Net Books were donated by Wild Tangent Games to the children of Jurunku Lower Basic School. The school's students and teachers will both benefit greatly.



Net Book donations were a hit in the village of Jurunku.



HopeFirst volunteers Barbara Trenary, Tim Johnson, Ansou Badji (friend of HopeFirst), Sandy Murray, Lori Hinton, Julie Cohen San Clemente, Allison Trenary, Satang Sallah (Gambian student) and Ismaila Cham (Gambian student).
Not pictured: Johannes Wolf and Matt Hoffman.

How You Can Help

• Donate to HopeFirst Foundation

A small, hands-on non-profit, donors can see directly where their money goes. A minimum of 95% of donations goes straight to HopeFirst Foundation projects in the field. Visit: www.hopefirst.org/do.htm


• Volunteer to Travel with HopeFirst Foundation to The Gambia

Visit www.hopefirst.org; send inquiries to sandym@hopefirst.org

• Volunteer to Travel with Kona on a BikeTown Africa Project

For more information on bike projects in other African countries, visit: http://moonshinemediaco.za/BikeTown_Africa/Participate.html

• Buy a Limited Edition Kona AfricaBike T-Shirt

at Alki Bike & Board in West Seattle, or online at <http://africabike.konaworld.com/archives/1117>
Shop owner and Kona dealer Stu Hennesey not only sells the unique men's, women's and kids' tees at \$25 each (all proceeds going to the program), he was a key component in teaching the HopeFirst Foundation crew how to assemble and repair Kona AfricaBikes before leaving for The Gambia. Hennesey also provided the group with discounted bike tools. Tees were designed by Kellen Peterson of Green Hill Clothes (www.greenhillclothes.com) 



(About the Author)

Lori Hinton is a Seattle-based freelance writer and author of *West Seattle 101* (www.hintoncreative.com). Hinton has a passion for meaningful travel and visited The Gambia as one of eight volunteers who built Kona AfricaBikes with HopeFirst Foundation.

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Lori Hinton, www.hintoncreative.com, September 2010
Barbara Trenary, September 2010

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