

Gambia 2025 (April 22nd- 29th)

We arrived in temperatures of almost 40 degrees and with a packed schedule, once landed, headed straight to Lamin Toubé nursery school, to see the completed perimeter wall we had already paid for and discussed funding the repaint of the school later that week. The following day was spent sorting resources and visiting the vastly improving Jabang health centre, where we supplied baby bottles and nappies, and donated two much needed wheelie bins, along with baby clothes, knitted blankets and stationery supplies. We then headed on to Jabangjelly health centre and were thrilled again, to see the progress since our last visit. Clearly the local community are getting involved and the government appears to be matching these efforts, resulting in major improvements all round. Friendly Smiles were happy to donate a laptop and first aid supplies and were able to fund a 'wish list' of life saving medicines, bought later that day in the neighbouring town.

Our visit to the 'Sisters of mercy' convent is always a beautiful experience and apart from donating large quantities of reading glasses/ clothes/ shoes and baby blankets, we also funded several sacks of rice, cooking oil and other food stuffs to support the outreach feeding programme.

This year, we decided to travel out more remotely and after nearly 4 hours, arrived in Soma, where we spent time in the school, delivering to the teachers the concept of 'drama', enabling them to involve the children in simple role playing and 'finding their voice'. We had lots of fun delivering the tale of 'The little gingerbread man', using masks on sticks, the only technical hitch being the need to keep running around every minute or so, in searing heat, chasing the gingerbread man, who kept telling us we couldn't catch him! He wasn't wrong, we couldn't and we nearly passed-out trying.

We also visited Brikama Fire station and left quantities of clothes, reading glasses and first aid supplies for their families. The firefighters were proud to show us around their rather primitive station, with their gleaming truck, but we noticed they no longer had a tv in their 'recreation' room, where they loved to watch the football. It had long since gone, which left them with precisely two mattresses on a floor and an empty tv shelf. Hardly enjoyable recreation between saving peoples lives, and so after a quick phone call home, I was happy to organise the purchase of a new tv for the Brikama brigade, thanks to my husband, who immediately agreed it was an 'essential' resource and transferred the funds! They are now a very happy fire brigade.

The weekend saw us back in Lamin , where we joined the teachers in a total repaint of the school, something that received smiles of delight from the children as they returned from the Easter holidays.

Before we left, we were happy to donate stationery, children's books, medical supplies, a new wheelie bin and most importantly, the funds, raised by St.Katharine's primary school, for a wonderful school trip, enabling the children to venture outside the village for the first time, on a bus to the beach and the snake park. St.Katharine's also provided quantities of football kit and boots, which we donated to the local football

team in Jabang, having watched them play a match, mostly barefoot, on the dusty pitch with sticks and string serving as goals.

Without a doubt, this trip highlighted to us all how much incredible progress is being made across the country. The road infrastructure is now much improved, the health and educational facilities continue to progress and the communities are taking control and stepping-up where they can, to match our efforts.

There are always highlights, but I think Sunday afternoon in Lamin, when hot and tired from painting, hearing the 'ice-cream man' was coming, was a memorable moment.

Peddalling down the dusty track, with a large ice box strapped to his bike and a small megaphone tied to the handle bars, playing a pre-recorded message of 'Ice cream five five, Ice cream five five' came a young gentleman, charging 5 dalassi for a scoop of ice cream in a small paper cup. It made us smile.

The trip's success is only made possible by people's kindness and generosity. Thank you to the knitters of St.Margaret's church, The Halstead Senior club, the wonderful children and parents of St.Katharine's Primary school, my family, neighbours and friends and all those lovely people who support my 'Bennett Bingo' nights at 'The Three Horseshoes'.

Finally, thank you to my small, but incredibly hardworking team of Jolene, Sharon and Alex. We will return next year, so watch out for my next Bennett Bingo night in September!

Lama lama 🎉

Mrs.Bennett.