

# The Story of Pencils for Kids | The Entrepreneurial Way

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November 24, 2011

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*“A simple pencil can open a world of possibilities!”*

In November of 2005, the Francophone Games – a celebration of sport and culture held every four years for all the French-speaking countries throughout the world – were held in Niamey, Niger. Dan Galbraith was an official photographer for the Canadian Team on assignment in Niger for five weeks. Dan was also going to Melbourne for the Commonwealth Games the following March 2006, as official photographer and so was I, as Manager of Special Events for the Canadian Team.

I called Dan in December to ask him a question about Melbourne. He sounded distraught and barely audible. I asked him what was wrong and he said that he was devastated by the poverty he witnessed in Niger. He couldn't function since he returned because he could not get the images of the children out of his mind.

Some Canadian athletes, including members of Canada's Judo Team, had visited a school in Niamey. Knowing that the children in Niger had so little, they brought books and supplies from Canada to give away. The Canadian Embassy recommended a particular region and the mayor of this region had them visit a school, where they discovered that 30 children in one class were sharing one pencil!

I was so moved by Dan's pain, and this story, that I instinctively responded, “Dan, let's not talk about it, let's do something.” He said, “What are we going to do?” and I said, “I don't know. I will call you back.”

My first thought was to find a way to send some school supplies to one school and do our small part. I called the Canadian Embassy in Niger the next day and conveyed that there were a few of us in Toronto who wanted to help a school in Niger if they could help us find a place to donate goods. They emailed me the name of a man to call. I called him that same day. He spoke no English at all and asked me to call him later that night at 7pm.

When I called that evening, his son, Mamoud Madougou, answered the phone. Mamoud is 33

and studied in Michigan. I asked Mamoud to ask his father to send me their wish list, a breakdown of the schools in their area etc... It was in one of our emails that I was told that Mamoud's father, Amadou Madougou was the Mayor of Libore, a region with 27 schools!! He was a very trusted member of his community and was formerly the Minister of Education. That is why the embassy recommended him to me. He held the respect of many and was regarded as a man of integrity. It turns out that this was the *very same man* that the embassy recommended to the Canadian athletes when they visited a school during the Francophone Games!

So instead of helping one school, we were now embracing an entire community with many schools. That was the beginning of the journey to start Pencils for Kids! I like to say it was an "accidental" journey, as I never set out to start a charity and change my life. It just happened.

I have loved connecting with the people in Libore, listening to their ideas and dreams for the future, and knowing that the hand of friendship extended by P4K has made a difference in their lives. We see this in big and little ways all the time. I will never forget the man who stopped to speak to me on my last visit, and simply said, "Merci." I didn't know who he was, but he spoke from the heart, echoing what many felt.

It has also been tremendously rewarding to connect other organizations in the world to Libore, organizations that are now also bringing their expertise in sport, in business, and in agriculture to this community of 25,000 people. In this way we feel we are making sustainable changes and spreading the word about Niger and Libore to many, many others. Project Play brought soccer balls and clinical soccer skills to all the villages in Libore, Eliminate Poverty Now has started three new entrepreneurial projects there. World-renowned scientist, Dov Pasternak is also helping us pilot the Farmers of the Future program in three schools. Pencils for Kids introduced all of these groups to the people of Libore.

In Libore, many of the children go to schools that have no walls, desks, or books. Often they sit on the dirt floor listening to their teachers under the hot sun.

This past year, DemGen's generosity enabled us to purchase locally made desks and chairs for the children in many schools so that they would no longer be on the dusty, hard ground.

The parents, teachers, and students in Libore hugely appreciated this! In addition, DemGen has been instrumental in helping us start a brand new kindergarten in a village that has never had one before, Sekire. The money will not only help build the structure, but will provide the teacher, small tables, chairs and educational resources as well for all the children ages 3-5 in this village. It will give them a head start and be a huge advantage in their education.

For me, it has always been the small stories of courage, sharing and gratitude that have inspired me the most. In 2008, one young girl in secondary school, Aichatou, arrived too late in the school year to benefit from the scholarships we awarded to two other girls for that year. Her friends, the only other two girls at that level, shared their scholarship money with her, dividing everything three ways, including the books and uniforms! By 2009, all three received scholarships, and this year Aichatou is in her final year of high school, an amazing accomplishment. It is our hope she will be one of the first girls in her community to graduate and go on to University.

And then there was the time in a women's group that a woman placed a small torn piece of paper in my hand, that read simply "your friend". Inspiring too is the story of Moussa who walks 20 kilometres every day to go to school and to receive the tutoring provided by the scholarship from Pencils for Kids.

Finally, when I saw firsthand the lettuce and tomatoes grown by the students in the village of Gueriguinde, and the mango trees they grafted and then sold in our Farmers of the Future program, I realized that we were beginning to have a genuine impact on their lives.

The journey of Pencils for Kids has taught us that **anyone** can start **anything** with the simple *will*

to try! When we started P4K, we had no experience in international development, did not speak the local language in Niger, or French (their official language), had no money or know-how. What we *did* have was determination to make a difference. At the end of the day, we have offered hope to a community far away, and let them know we cared. We have built three schools, a library, and kindergartens. We sponsored scholarships for girls, a sewing centre for girls, and agricultural programs. But our greatest gift has been the gift of hope.

That is why the “pencil” will always be for us a symbol of education, literacy, and hope.

Pencils for Kids is a registered Canadian charity and remains an entirely volunteer organization with no paid staff. At least 97% of all money raised goes to our projects.

There is a beautiful anonymous quote about a pencil:

***A PENCIL MAKER TOLD THE PENCIL 5 IMPORTANT LESSONS JUST BEFORE PUTTING IT IN THE BOX.***

***He said:***

- 1.) EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL ALWAYS LEAVE A MARK.***
- 2.) YOU CAN ALWAYS CORRECT THE MISTAKES YOU MAKE.***
- 3.) WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS WHAT IS INSIDE OF YOU.***
- 4.) IN LIFE, YOU WILL UNDERGO PAINFUL SHARPENINGS,  
WHICH WILL ONLY MAKE YOU BETTER.***
- 5.) TO BE THE BEST PENCIL, YOU MUST ALLOW YOURSELF  
TO BE HELD AND GUIDED BY THE HAND THAT HOLDS YOU.***