

Heather's visit to The Gambia, December 2011

"This visit was beyond all my expectations," said Heather. "It was great, wonderful, magic."

At three weeks, this was Heather's longest visit so far to The Gambia. It was planned that way so that she could spend the first week getting ready for the exhibition in the Alliance Francaise, the middle week hosting the exhibition and the last week sorting things out and running normal workshop activities.



Rug Aid co-opted director Pam Bolam's twin sister Miriam was on hand to help Heather during the first week, which went very quickly (although not quite as planned). During that week, the first four Rug Aid-designed prayer mats were created from scratch. Every Muslim prayer mat is a particular size (roughly 2' 6" by 4', 75 by 120 cm) and one popular design features the onion-shaped dome of a mosque.

[Photo left shows a typical Rug Aid prayer mat.] There is also a box-shape in the centre of many rugs and the design often features a moon and a star. The basic design Heather drew was based on Ebrima Trawally's personal prayer mat, and Heather is convinced

that hooky prayer mats will sell in The Gambia because every Muslim must own one.

However, soon after Heather arrived in The Gambia, Ebrima had told her that he had good and bad news. She asked for the bad news first and he told her that the Alliance Francaise had double-booked the exhibition space and, because the other people had paid the fee up-front, the five-day Rug Aid exhibition had been cancelled. You may remember that the National Environmental Agency was going to fund the exhibition space but they clearly did not get their payment in soon enough. Heather had asked the rug-makers to produce recycled rugs using plastic bags and to include the letters NEA in some rugs, and the students had done as she asked.

The good news was that the Gambian Chamber of Commerce's Trade Fair would start on Thursday 8th December and that, for £400, Rug Aid could have a stand for the ten days it lasted. As this biennial event attracts many hundreds of visitors, including the President of The Gambia, Heather decided that it was too good an opportunity to miss. The other costs of the event came to £100 and Heather said that spending a total of £500 to promote Rug Aid locally was "well worth it."

The Trade Fair takes place in the open air: it was very hot and dusty but hundreds of people stopped to look at the Rug Aid stand, which Heather thought was one of the best and most colourful of the 300 stands in the show. Ebrima helped Heather on the stand every morning but he had end of term exams so he had to leave her alone in the afternoon. Despite his absence, Heather coped with the many visitors who were attracted by the bright colours of the rugs which Ebrima had helped her to hang on the walls of the stand. Heather used brown fabric to line the walls of the open-fronted wooden structure and Ebrima knocked nails into the wood (using a heavy ornament as they did not have a hammer) to hang the rugs. "It looked like a picture gallery," said Heather. No furniture was provided so Ebrima borrowed a table and some chairs from the GOVI School. [Photo above shows Heather preparing the display on the Rug Aid stand.]



Every day two rug-makers, one sighted and one blind, joined Heather on the stand (travelling both ways in a taxi funded by Rug Aid). Heather gave them breakfast before the day's work started as well as a meal of fish and rice later in the day. Ebrima also brought the sewing machine which Pauline Link donated a year ago to the stand and Heather used it every day to hem pieces of hessian for the rug makers. She had previously sent out a roll of her preferred even-weave Scottish hessian in a van driven by David Poynton, the Friends of GOVI contact whose generosity of spirit enabled Rug Aid to start work in The Gambia in 2007. Heather spent some of her time at the show drawing designs for the rug makers to work on. In addition to rugs, a rug-making friend of Heather's from Durham, England, gave Heather some hessian bags she had made. At the workshop, Heather got the students to add hooked patterns and words to the bags. They were all sold from the stand.



Heather says that she “was really scared” about running the stand when Ebrima wasn’t there but she drew on her experience of shows around the world and just got on with it, treating this event just the same as the others. Despite her own belief in Rug Aid, Heather was genuinely surprised by the visitors’ interest in the stand: since her first visit to The Gambia in 2007 she has felt that blind Gambians are particularly stigmatised. However, her experience at the Trade Fair changed her mind about this: every day there were crowds of people at the Rug Aid stand, including school children. Many visitors asked Heather how Ernest made rugs, they seemed genuinely puzzled by his ability to carry out the work without sight. Her response was simply to suggest to the visitors that, because Ernest is an intelligent and articulate man, they could talk to him about it. Engaging with Ernest on a one-to-one basis made a huge difference to the way people perceived his disability, and he really appreciated the novelty of this experience: sadly, blind people are often talked down to as though they have learning difficulties and shouted at as though their hearing is impaired as well as their vision. At the Trade Fair, Ernest was treated with the respect he deserves as a talented rug maker. Heather feels that the event was an education about blind people for the hundreds of members of the Gambian public who visited the stand over the ten days the Trade Fair lasted. The very popular Ernest worked all day when he was there and, when he had a day off, Babacou took his place. Jainaba Touray was one of the sighted rug-makers who attended: she made a fabulous prayer mat which Heather could not fault – she says it was better than some UK-made rugs!

Almost every visitor wanted Heather to show them how to make a rug and most of the teachers asked her to visit their schools to teach the pupils. However, Heather has promised the visually-impaired people she works with that she will not teach any other Gambians in order that their work retains its unique appeal. Heather has noticed that everywhere you go in The Gambia you are offered similar souvenirs – beaded items, batik pictures and wood carvings. She has always been aware that rug-making is a very different activity to most of the crafts on offer to tourists and she is keen not to dilute the value of the work she is doing with the blind by teaching other people to make rugs. One young African girl visited the stand every day and sat watching Ernest as he worked: Heather knows that, eventually, someone will copy the idea of rug-making but she hopes that the Rug Aid trainees will always have a special following because of their visual impairments.

The head teachers of some of the girls’ schools who visited the stand were very persuasive and tried very hard to get Heather into their classes to teach rug-making, but she resisted. One particular woman who ran a centre for street children more or less demanded that Ebrima get Heather to teach her children: the normally resourceful Ebrima found himself quite unable to resist the pressure and had to ask for Heather’s help in dealing with her! Every morning Ebrima talked to the groups of school children who visited the stand. When some of these children expressed their sorrow that Ernest was blind Ebrima gave them a very kind talk, asking first of all



if they knew the difference between sympathy and empathy. He stressed that blind people need empathy, not sympathy. Heather was very impressed with the way Ebrima interacted with all of the visitors, especially the children.

Fifty rugs were sold from the stand during the ten days of the show and several of the rugs could have been sold several times over, including the yellow monkey made by the completely blind Babacou. Any rug which featured an animal sold very quickly: a crocodile made by Ernest was sold to a local government body, and rugs with snakes were popular too. The most wonderful news is that Ebrima took an order book back to the workshop for duplicates of rugs to be

made for disappointed buyers! The rugs sold included the four prayer mats, and rug buyers were Gambians as well as tourists. Some people bought more than one rug. *[Photo above shows Ernest’s Monkey mat.]*

One of the first ‘multiple’ buyers was a “gorgeous, handsome young man” (as Heather described him!) who appeared while Heather was hemming on the sewing machine. The rugs were priced on swing tickets and, standing at the front of the booth, this man said “I think I’ll take that one” at which point Heather admits she thought “oh good – we’ve got a sale.” As she listened with half an ear, he went on to say “I’ll have that one too. And how about that one. I think I’ll have that one too. And that one as well.” By this time Heather had stopped sewing and found herself staring at him: in the end, he bought ten rugs! Heather asked him if he had a shop, thinking he was going to re-sell them. To her great surprise he said he did not have a shop: he worked at the Venezuelan Embassy. He explained that the rugs would decorate the walls of their new office. He said that he really wanted to support what Rug Aid was doing in The Gambia, saying that he was in awe of the rug makers’

work. It's amazing to think of the variety of people who might see those rugs hanging on the walls of the Venezuelan Embassy in The Gambia and we can surely be allowed to hope that some of them will be interested enough to visit the workshop... He was kind enough to leave one of his purchases on the stand so that Ebrima could deliver it to him after Heather used it at the talk she gave to Rotary International on the second Friday night of the Trade Fair.

Heather admits to having felt rather scared for the stock levels when, soon after the 'Venezuelan' sale, a lady bought fourteen rugs. As she identified the ones she wanted (including a very striking tall narrow rug with a zigzag pattern, hooked in natural shades of brown and cream), the buyer offered to leave them on display until the Trade Fair ended so that the stand still looked good. Heather wrote *Sold* on the rugs' labels, including those which were simply displayed lying on the table. She asked the lady who she was in order to write her name on the price tags, and she also asked if she had a shop. The lady, whose name was Anna, replied "Yes, I have the Top Shops." These are [hotel shops](#) which sell locally-made products, one of which is at the Ocean Bay Hotel where Heather always stays. When Chrissie last visited the workshop she tried to persuade Anna to take rugs to sell in the shops, but Anna had declined. Visiting the stand and seeing the rug-makers in action clearly changed her mind because, in addition to taking rugs to sell, she told Heather that two of the rugs will hang in her own home. Top Shop will not make any money on these sales, by the way: when Heather was getting ready to leave The Gambia she visited one of them and saw that the rugs were on sale at their Trade Fair prices. There was a notice above them which displayed the Rug Aid leaflet and said that there was no profit in the sale for Top Shop, simply asking people to show their support for blind people by buying the rugs.

Every rug was priced: to start with, the most expensive ones were the prayer mats at 800 Dalasis (under £20) which Heather thought was cheap considering the quality of the work. However, Ebrima thought that price was too high and reduced them to 600 Dalasis. When the man from the Venezuelan Embassy was buying rugs he didn't question the cost of any of them, and Heather feels he would have paid 800 Dalasis or more for the prayer mats! In future Heather thinks that, if the rugs are selling, the prices should go up! She says that this



event gave her the opportunity to get the marketing right and that it was a fabulous learning experience which allowed her to fathom out who liked what.

All the visitors to the Rug Aid stand were amazed by what they saw. The stand promoted the recycling aspect of rug-making and the rugs on display included some which were made of used plastic bags. When Heather last visited the workshop (in March 2011) she told the students that they had to do a lot of preparatory work before the exhibition: on her arrival this time, she was delighted to find that they had done as she asked and that there was a stack of fabulous rugs ready for finishing off, some with the letters NEA.

[Photo above shows Heather using the sewing machine and an NEA recycled plastic bag mat.]

The President of The Gambia did not visit the Trade Fair but Aja Dr Isatou Njie-Saidy, the Lady Vice-President, who is also the Minister for Women and Children, did attend. One of her entourage approached the Rug Aid stand ahead of her and said "Will you clear the decks? You are getting a visit from the Vice President!" Heather tidied up very quickly so that the Lady Vice-President could enter the stand and talk to the blind rug maker on duty that day. The visit was on Gambian TV, and Ebrima filmed it too: that film will appear on the Rug Aid website soon. *[Photo right shows, left to right, Heather, Ebrima, Haddy, the Lady Vice-President and Ernest.]*



The Lady Vice-President talked to Ernest and Heather, who also met the Ministers of Sport, Youth, Employment, Tourism, Culture, Basic and Secondary Education, and Trade and Industry! "It was amazing!" said Heather. The next day, a TV crew visited and filmed Ernest and Ebrima talking about Rug Aid. At one point on Saturday morning, Heather found herself unexpectedly on Gambian radio after Ernest handed her a mobile phone. Taking it to her ear, she said "Hello, hello: is there anybody there?" not knowing to whom she was speaking. After a moment, a voice said "Madam, you are speaking to thousands of people across The Gambia on live radio!"

Regaining her composure very quickly, Heather chatted to the presenter for a while about what Rug Aid does and wants to do in the future.

Heather says that Rug Aid took two huge steps forward on this trip. The first step is that Heather feels certain that massive progress has been in showing Gambians that their fellow citizens who happen to be blind are not useless. The second major step was when Heather was approached by an American woman, Alyssa, who is married to a Gambian: she asked to buy a wall full of rugs. Upon being told that they had all been sold, she ordered a set of duplicates. Alyssa has a shop in The Gambia which sells local products and another shop in the United States of America which sells quilts and so on. It is to this latter shop that she will import the rugs. Rug Aid has previously looked into and been overwhelmed by the cost and complexity of shipping rugs to the USA so the news that Alyssa, who already has the logistics in place, is keen to sell Rug Aid trainee's work is wonderful! We'll give more information about where that shop is and how to contact Alyssa in a future newsletter. Before the Trade Fair, Heather had talked to the Gambian office of the American Chamber of Commerce and they had agreed to help Rug Aid get mats there: it's great to think that we no longer need to do this, and that Alyssa will help us to get rugs into the USA.

Alyssa's order is for six rugs of one design and six of another, all of them colour planned to her specific requirements. These rugs are being made now, but Heather is not there to do the quality control checking required. This is one area where Heather is a little bit concerned about what happens in her absence, despite having told the rug makers (and Ebrima) time and time again what they need to look out for. We can only hope that they paid attention this time, now that they are aware just how popular their work is! Jainaba Touray is the best rug maker: there were no flaws in her prayer mat and Heather is hopeful that she will act as quality control for the whole group. This will ensure that the work is finished to the high standard required now that the hooking is of such good quality. Having three big buyers visit the stand and buy so many rugs was very encouraging for the rug makers as well as for Heather and Ebrima.

Anna (from Top Shop) visited the stand every day and, eventually, asked Heather whether she would like some fabrics. Heather's response was typical of her: "You're kidding, aren't you?" Anna offered to give Rug Aid the sweepings from the floor of the workshop where she makes dolls, tops and patchwork. The first such sack, after sorting, led to a big pile of usable fabrics which are now in the workshop. Anna will save all her scraps in future and give them to Ebrima. In addition, Heather was offered fabric scraps by George, who runs a paper skills craft centre, and by Kathy so the workshop might be better supplied in future. However, Heather feels that her lack of a Gambian phone number could be a problem: Ebrima is studying and cannot answer his phone in class any more than we can expect him to answer it when he is writing an essay or reading a text book at home. Heather wants to get a Gambian mobile number so that she is personally available to speak to anyone ringing from The Gambia for the cost (to them) of a local mobile call. She is also keen to set up a co-operative in The Gambia, to be headed by Ebrima, to run the workshop. That has always been her dream but she did not think that it would

really be a possibility until this visit.



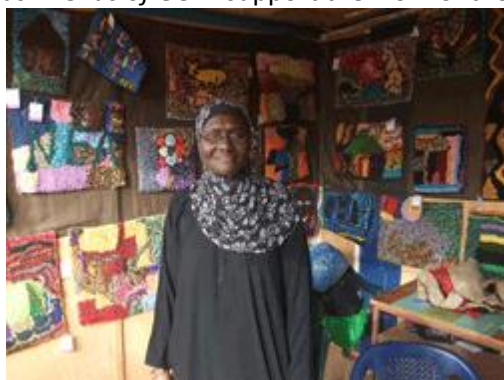
Many of the visitors asked where they could visit Rug Aid, where they could see the rugs being made. This leads into the second piece of news to come out of this visit (as if all that about sales of rugs and the way blind people are perceived wasn't enough!): we have been offered the year-round use of one of the rooms which was previously used for admin by the GOVI School. *[Photo left shows the exterior of the room we have been offered.]* This is possible because the school board is very short of money at the

moment and is looking for tenants for parts of their building. Renting this room will cost around £1,200 for a year and we need to do some work in the rooms before we can move in, but having a permanent base in Serrekunde would be so very helpful at this stage in Rug Aid's life. It would give us a location which people can visit to see rugs being made, and secure premises in which work can be both stored and sold. We will read the offer we have been made very carefully to ensure that we fully understand our rights and responsibilities before we sign, but it looks like a very good idea. Rug Aid has been associated with the GOVI School since our first exploratory visit in February 2007 and people associate us with the organisation and the wonderful work they do for blind children and adults, so it makes sense to continue that association. We will continue to keep an eye on the market in case somewhere perfect becomes available to buy but renting a room from GOVI is a very good

immediate solution to a major problem. In the meantime, Ebrima has agreed to get a crowd of rug makers into the current borrowed workshop at the school if an important buyer wants to see the project at work.

If we accept the GOVI offer, the workshop will be open to the public so Heather stressed to Ebrima that it must be kept spotlessly clean at all times. In addition, rug-makers and other workers must become members of the cooperative to work there: that will help to avoid the problem we currently have of people bringing their non-working friends to the workshop. Heather was wondering how these rules could be enforced and feels that there should be a set of clear guidelines which govern access and use of to the workshop. It need not be open every day of the week but it must be open on the days when tour buses are in the area. After talking to Ernest, a German friend of Anna's told Heather that she runs a tour company in Germany and said that she would like to bring her tourists to the workshop in future. Hooray!

In future, we would like Ebrima to be able to take a salary from running the workshop as a charitable cooperative, with our support, but we need to investigate this idea properly. Very soon, Rug Aid and Ebrima must join the local Association for the Disabled. Rug Aid could become *Friends of the Workshop* in the same way as *Friends of GOVI* support the work of the GOVI School. We need to work with Ebrima to decide who will be on



the cooperative's committee – Heather thinks that she should be on the board and thinks that Ebrima should be on the Rug Aid board in return.

At the exhibition Heather met Khadyah, a Gambian Muslim living in London who visits The Gambia every year and takes out containers full of stuff. *[Photo left shows Khadyah visiting the Rug Aid stand.]* Khadyah is a practice nurse who is opening a clinic in The Gambia next year and she has set up a charity in The Gambia. Khadyah was in The Gambia with her friend Helen who lives in Hebden Bridge: Helen has also set up a charity in The Gambia and she has shipped a container to the country from the UK every year for eleven years.

This container is filled with stuff which she sells to raise money for street kids. Back home, Helen helps to run The Nerve Centre in Huddersfield, an NHS-run facility which provides help for people with a variety of neurological conditions. Helen, Heather and Chrissie are due to meet at The Nerve Centre in January to talk about how Heather's rug-making skills and Chrissie's training as a rehabilitation officer for people with visual impairments could be of help to the work Helen does.

On the Friday night Heather gave a talk to Rotary International at the Senegambia Beach Hotel and, before the meeting, she met with Khadyah, Helen and Ebrima in the hotel. Heather is thrilled that both women are interested in helping Rug Aid and feels that they will be a great asset because they have so much local knowledge: in addition, they know about shipping containers, how to start and run charities and lots of other useful things. Khadyah and a group of youths from a school in London are visiting The Gambia in February. The building we have been offered will be empty from January and the GOVI board want it to be used straight away. Khadyah is looking for a project for her group of youths to do while in The Gambia: they could decorate the building for us, and Heather has already looked at paints in a shop there!

It's all very exciting!

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The website www.rug-aid.org has lots more photos from this visit and others – look in *Gallery* where you'll find all sorts of photos: these ones are in *Rug Aid in The Gambia*, the collection called *December 2011*

You can contact Rug Aid by email sent to info@rug-aid.org or by post sent to our registered office at Greencroft, Reeth, North Yorkshire DL11 6QT. Thank you for your interest.