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# Grown Accustomed to this Place

By Rachel Hatch



**O'Rourke and her host siblings Marianne and Mohammed go for a walk with a friend in the Baobab neighborhood of Dakar.**

Although she had many adventures in the west African country of Senegal, some of the moments that Shannon O'Rourke '07 enjoyed most were the quiet ones.

She recalls "laying on a foam mattress in the yard" with her host mother and siblings on many sweltering African nights, "talking and looking up at the stars."

O'Rourke spent six months in the Republic of Senegal this year on a Rotary Cultural Ambassador Scholarship. Senegal is a predominantly rural, Muslim country about the size of South Dakota, located on the westernmost point of Africa.

An international studies and political science double major, O'Rourke spent the spring semester of her junior year in Switzerland where she did research on human and economic development in Tanzania. "Through my research and

conversations I had with a Tanzanian representative to the World Trade Organization, I developed a desire to go to Africa."

O'Rourke discovered the Rotary scholarship, which would allow her to study Arabic in Tanzania or French in Senegal. "I'd already studied French in college and high school for a few years, so I decided on Senegal," she said.

The scholarship required her to study 225 hours of French with a professor at a small language school in Senegal's capital city of Dakar. O'Rourke also studied Wolof, one of the many other languages spoken in Senegal. "Most people can speak French in Dakar because the country was once a French colony, but once you get outside the city, fewer people speak it. The most common language in the area is Wolof, which was tough for me to learn because I'm a visual learner, and the language isn't generally written down, so I had to learn it by ear."

O'Rourke extended her Rotary scholarship by taking an internship with the not-for-profit organization 10,000 Girls, which offers educational opportunities to young women in the Kaolack region of Senegal. According to its Web site, the program "helps girls stay in school, get the most out of their education, and acquire the skills needed for lifelong learning." Lowering the staggering 53 percent school dropout rate among girls in Kaolack is a primary goal.

O'Rourke helped start a bookmobile to travel to villages in the region, where books are rare. "My project was to sort through and organize 39,000 books for donation to high schools in the Kaolack area. The books were used in high school classes and English clubs, and used to create libraries in the schools that do not have one. I worked with local teachers to get them the right kind of textbooks to use in their classrooms and also for their own continuing education."

In Kaolack, O'Rourke had to adjust to a slower-paced life in a place with no running water and open-air sewers. On the plus side, she says, "I was never lonely. I found I could easily start a dance party by simply turning on some music! My host siblings and mother would appear in my room within just a few minutes and start to dance."

As her feelings of fondness for the Senegalese people grew, so did O'Rourke's desire to help in a country where, she says, almost half the population lives below the poverty line, unemployment is near 50 percent, and infant and maternal mortality rates are alarmingly high, especially in rural areas. She helped the Dakar Rotary Club translate documents seeking funding from English-speaking countries for a maternity clinic that will provide prenatal care in the country's Diourbel region, about 90 miles east of the capital.



**O'Rourke (above center) poses with her honorary "aunts" and "grandmother" on their way to a party in nearby Kaolack. The multi-day event honored a man who had returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca.**



**O'Rourke's host brother Mohammed and a friend walk along a busy intersection in the Baobab neighborhood of Dakar. In the background are a public bus and one of the ubiquitous yellow taxis found everywhere in Dakar.**

O'Rourke lived with a host family that included five children, including 6-year-old Marianne, "who rarely left my side when I was around the house. She always wanted to play Cache-Cache (Hide and Seek) and Un, Deux, Trois, Chocolat Glacée (Red Light, Green Light)."

O'Rourke was amused to find she was considered an 'old maid' by Senegalese standards. "Women typically marry young in Senegal and men can take more than one wife, so I got a lot of marriage proposals from both single and married men. At age 23, I am past the prime marrying age for women in the country, and some Senegalese people I met shared their concerns that I would have difficulty finding a husband at this age," she said.

This fall, O'Rourke enrolled at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to earn her master's degree in international development studies. She intends to focus her studies on the necessary role that women play in development, as well as the

importance of girls' education and basic health care — interests that reflect her time in Senegal.

Looking back on those experiences, O'Rourke realizes how far she traveled from the day she first arrived in Dakar, staring out the window on the drive from the airport "because everything looked so different. I had never seen anything like it."

Now she thinks of this once-strange place as a second home. "My host families have become my family in Senegal now, and I miss them. I will go back to visit, *inch'allah*," she says, adding the Senegalese phrase for "God willing," which is always used when talking about things to come. "You never know what the future holds."