

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celia Morris (right, with Luca D'Ottavio) is the author of *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* and *Storming the Statehouse: Running for Governor* with Ann Richards and Dianne Feinstein. Her most recent book is an autobiography, *Finding Celia's Place*. Linda Rivero, president and founder of Women Travel for Peace, can be reached at lrivero@womentravelforpeace.org.

Dancing on the Side in Senegal

by Celia Morris

The author celebrated her 73rd birthday in a way she could hardly have imagined—surrounded by women who would now be able to draw water year-round in their own village.

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For Americans flying into an African country three days after Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, a small Obama button guaranteed an ecstatic reception. Each of us had traveled abroad in the years when "America" could be a dirty word, and to feel proud again of our country and see delight in welcoming faces was rather like mainstreaming champagne. The Senegalese may be naturally effusive, but in any case, our welcome everywhere was grand. We were bound for the village of



Finishing the well.

Marsassoum in southern Senegal. Our goal, determined the previous spring at a long meeting of about 60 village women: to pay for a well these women needed and to help finish it. Linda Rivero, *maestra* of [Women Travel for Peace](#), had put out the word, and four women excited about the prospect of contributing something tangible to women in a developing country had volunteered for an unpredictable adventure.

Three of us set out from Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C.: Patricia DiVecchio, a middle-aged businesswoman, Chhayal Parikh, a 30-year-old video journalist, and I, a writer and editor. In Dakar, we joined Maria Sanchez, a Red Cross official from southern California, and Linda, who orchestrated the entire trip.

After three days exploring Dakar, we flew a prop plane to Ziguinchor, where we were met by Luca D'Ottavio, a curly-haired Italian whose Guest House accommodated people from all over the world who wanted, as we did, to make a small contribution to people in a land new to them. It turned out to be a stucco building, with clean lines and airy spaces, including a garden terrace where we ate fine meals turned out under the most trying circumstances by Kalilou, our French-trained chef. Silek, our house-girl, kissed us each on both cheeks morning and night. The Guest House had no down side, unless you count the times the power went off or the tap dried up.

One of the highlights of our trip literally erupted in the back



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garden after one of Kalilou's brilliant dinners, with a rumbling of drums and shrieking of whistles, a string of musicians prancing and wheeling and a troupe of five women and two girls with arms flailing, legs popping, heads snapping. And in not so long a time, we were up there dancing with them.

The opposite pole to such frenzy is the waiting, a major activity in Senegal. But on the morning we expected to have our first glimpse of Marsassoum, we finally took off in the van along roads lined with shops and dwellings with tin roofs held down with heavy rocks or old tires. Roosters crossed the road with a proprietary air, along with goats, pigs, dogs, cats, donkeys, and probably a ferret or two. The land is flatter than Lubbock, Texas, which I hadn't known was possible.

We were of course expected. After walking through a field of waist-high rice and wonderful-smelling mint to a clearing that was home to those we'd come to help, we were welcomed ebulliently with hugs and smiles, and then songs and even more dancing. We looked out over our 60-odd hosts, stunned by the brilliant colors of their clothes and the startling fact that none of the elaborately patterned fabric was the same. It was hard to imagine their lives to be as tough and meager as in fact they are, for we had never imagined poverty so gaily suited up.

Several of the women had cell phones dangling from cords around their necks—our sole reminder in that scene of our familiar world. But the well that was the focus of our efforts was almost finished and ready for our inspection. It was made of concrete rings piled atop one another, each one about three feet across and two feet deep, and the ninth and final ring was yet to be put in place. Our immediate job was to remove as much water as possible so the well-digger could go deeper, so the women showed us how to drop a plastic bucket fastened to a rope down into the well. The trick was to get the bucket to land on its side to take in water until it was full, haul it up hand over hand until it cleared the top of the well, slosh the water onto a patch of onions or rice—and then start over.

They also introduced us to the harvesting of rice, handing us each a small, dull knife. Working alongside them, we began our little harvest, depositing it by the handfuls into the general store and learning in the process just how labor-intensive rice farming is.

Each day, when we got back to the Guest House, we felt as grungy as we had ever been. On the first night I walked fully clothed into my shower, gradually peeling off one layer at a time while using detergent on myself as well as on my clothes. The fact that we had no hot water didn't even rank as a minor irritant. The second day I learned to put the filthy clothes aside for the next day, when they would simply get dirtier.

Our last day at Marsassoum was a celebration of the well, which would be dedicated by a locally prominent politician. It was also my 73rd birthday. We all dressed ceremoniously, in traditional *boubous* or variations thereof. The dancing, singing and hugging began as soon as we were met by a phalanx of beautifully dressed village women and kept on through the day. Children filed past to shake our hands, schooled early in the charming Senegalese customs of greeting. And Chhayal's pictures show myriads of happy people caught up in irrepressible glee.

When we got back to the Guest House that evening, both the power *and* the water were off. But Kalilou nevertheless managed to turn out another superb meal so that we could sit under the passion fruit vine with a few candles for illumination and mull over the extraordinary days just past. Together we had entered a world much needier than anything we'd seen before, and whatever we could do seemed pitiful. But always we would be grateful to a cluster of village women for the warmth and gaiety with which they had welcomed us, and, in the end, for stretching our minds and enriching our hearts.