

# An epic wanderer finds his home

## Youth volunteer brings a world of experience

By Shira Schoenberg, Concord Monitor Staff



**Noel Sagna of Hillsboro**

Photo taken by Ken Williams of the Concord Monitor

**Hillsboro** – Francois Noel Sagna's small office in a town-owned building in Hillsboro is furnished with little more than a whiteboard, a desk and a few chairs. But these accommodations are luxurious after his previous job - he has a roof

over his head, a bathroom with running water, and adequate food.

Sagna, 47, an Americorps/Vista volunteer who develops youth programming for the grassroots Family Youth Investment, spent eight years helping war refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia who fled to camps in Guinea, West Africa. In the camps, where rows of white tarpaulin tents sheltered inhabitants suffering from malaria and malnourishment, Sagna founded ASPIR, the Association of Sports for the Improvement of Refugees/Returnees, which provided culture, music and sports activities.

"When I went, the refugees just had shelter, food and health - that's not enough to live, to have a normal life," Sagna said.

Sagna's roundabout journey from West Africa to New Hampshire started in Senegal, where he entered Catholic seminary, intending to become a brother. The seminary taught skills to build community churches - Sagna studied carpentry. But he was kicked out of the seminary for disagreeing with church policy - he claims the church fired his sister, a nun, after she had surgery.

So Sagna finished high school and enrolled in the Senegal air force, where he served for two years as an assistant aviation mechanic. He then became a military police officer, a position he held for 14 years.

Sagna recalls his biography in a dispassionate voice, apparently seeing nothing remark-

able about a job providing security detail for then-President Abdou Diouf, patrolling barricades between schools and striking teachers or students, and acting as a peacekeeper in south Senegal, protecting the population from rebels. According to the CIA World Factbook, separatists have sporadically fought government forces in the southern Casamance region since 1982, and the conflict has displaced 17,000 people. Rebels hid in forests along the borders, Sagna said, and both sides put up land mines, making it dangerous for farmers to grow crops or children to walk to school.

It was in the police force that Sagna started working with kids. He formed a break dancing group, hop

ing it would keep kids off the streets and off drugs. By 1995, he had enough of the police force. "I prefer to make a positive contribution than arrest people," he said.

He founded the Dizzy Gillespie Foundation to promote jazz, and married a peace corps volunteer from Oregon, whom he later divorced. The couple moved to Oregon for two years, where Sagna did construction research. He then came to New Hampshire, because he had a friend in Canterbury, and worked in construction, before returning to West Africa in 1998, this time to Guinea.

At first, he planned to work with amputees. He had ideas for improving and repairing wheelchairs. But many refugees were not interested. So he founded ASPIR, which he funded out of his own pocket before getting money from the United Nations, UNICEF and the U.S. Embassy.

Through the organization, Sagna organized tournaments in soccer, basketball, volleyball and track and field. He had teams for kids, adults, and even one soccer team of ladies over 50. He ran drama, dance and musical performances. He built resource centers with libraries, meeting spaces and offices. He organized children's days and women's days, celebrated with parades,

performances and tug-of-war. He married peace corps volunteer Kary Jencks from New Boston, and then prizes were used shoes and t-shirts sent by Jencks's mother, a teacher at John Stark High School.

In Guinea, about 300,000 refugees live in 20 camps, Sagna said. Families live side by side, up to 60 people in a 20-by 10 foot tent for their first months. Eventually, they build shacks of sticks and mud, with grass roofs. Refugees live off food donated by the United Nations World Food Program - bulger wheat, dried beans or peas, sugar and oil. Some sell the food for rice, an African staple. They cook by burning charcoal or wood, and the smells fill the air. The camps have pumps with pipes next to the river, which are used for communal showers and latrines. Malaria, malnourishment, diarrhea, tuberculosis and yellow fever are common, Sagna said.

"People live there 2, 3, 10 years. They've lost everything," Sagna said.

Sagna lived 20 to 50 miles from several camps - a drive that could take two to four hours on rutted roads - so sometimes he slept among the refugees.

He gets angry when he talks about United Nations workers he said were only out for their paychecks. He describes workers offering food for sex, and giving scant help to sick refugees. "They buy nice cars more than use the money for people who need it," he said.

Last year, Jencks's mother found out she had cancer, and the couple moved to New

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Hampshire to be near her. She died this summer. Sagna's son, who will turn 2 on Halloween, was born here. His 17-year-old son still lives in Senegal. Both Sagna and his wife went back to school - he studies community economic development at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester and she studies public health at the University of New Hampshire.

Sagna applied to AmeriCorps/Vista, a program that helps non-profits serve low income communities, and was hired last month by Family Youth Investment, which creates family and youth programs in Hillsboro. According to Janet Heikkila, coordinator of volunteer services, the job is mostly administrative and fundraising.

"He has experience building an organization from the start and a desire for helping kids," Heikkila said.

Although he has not met another African in Hillsboro, Sagna, wearing an AmeriCorps sweatshirt, said he is enjoying meeting people and playing pool and foosball with the kids. He plans to bring music and dance performers from other cultures, including Africa. He convinced the town's youth director to buy games like Scrabble and Monopoly to wean kids away from violent video games.

He has been exploring town, looking for space, donations and resources. Office of Youth Services Director Peter Brigham called Sagna "a guy you don't need to babysit." Brigham said Sagna is not afraid to call important community members. "He'll just pick up the phone and ask for what he wants for the community," Brigham said. "He knows what he wants and goes after it without thinking about politics."

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