



Priska and her family

Everyone has a story. H el ene's, the wife of our guardian, Apollinaire, is one of a very unhappy, neglected childhood, unloved by her father, the patriarch of the family, who ruled over them all. When H el ene asked him for money to continue her schooling, he refused, and she had to find jobs to pay for her uniform, books, notebooks and pencils. She probably had to earn enough to feed herself as well. She was smart and succeeded in passing her Baccaalaureate exams, the French equivalent of "A" levels in England or graduating from high school in the States or Canada with top grades.

Unsurprisingly, in a desperate attempt to find love and escape her father, she became pregnant at a young age, and, of course, was thrown out of her parent's house. But they kept the little girl, Priska, her daughter. Fortunately, God was on her side, and H el ene soon found an older man, Apollinaire, who wanted to marry her, promised to take care of her and raise any children they had together.

About a year ago, Apollinaire came to Bio-Benin seeking day labor, clearing the fields and planting corn, rice and manioc. Guillaume was impressed with his work ethic and needing a guardian to look after the house during his frequent absences, he asked Apollinaire to fill this permanent position.

He, his wife and two small boys moved into a modest house on the property and receive, collectively, \$100 a month. In return, he feeds the chickens, waters the plants during the dry season, takes care of the composting, and does many odd jobs around the property to keep everything safe and organized. Most importantly, at night and when we leave on a trip he is there to protect against poachers or burglars. His wife does our laundry once a week and keeps the house clean.

Meanwhile, Priska, H  l  ne's daughter, was languishing in the care of her grandfather and his third wife. The old man is dour. I've never seen him smile when he occasionally visits. Each time he arrives, unannounced, and H  l  ne typically disappears for a few hours, unwilling to face him. Last week, when the father came to visit, Apollinaire told me about this secret child the grandfather was refusing to give back to her mother, even though her living conditions now far surpass his own. I suggested that at least they should request Priska be allowed to visit and get to know her younger brothers, Emmanuel (4 today) and Claude; perhaps even spend the night.

The next news I hear is that H  l  ne has gone to visit her daughter at her father's house and somehow managed to smuggle Priska back to her house here. The little girl seemed sad and morose at first, but after a few days running around with Emmanuel, feeding the chickens, and helping her mother with Claude, she seems settled and much happier. The grandfather, of course, arrived in a huff a couple of days later, demanding that Priska return home with him. Apollinaire stood up to him and refused to let her go. Priska said she wanted to stay.

So far, so good. If the story ends happily Priska will settle in with her mother, brothers and stepfather and go to the elementary school nearby with Emmanuel, who starts kindergarten in September. I am, meanwhile, delighted that both Apollinaire and H  l  ne seem thoroughly settled and she is finally happily reunited with her missing child. One more small contribution to helping improve people's lives here by giving them a living wage on which they can live comfortably, eat well and want for nothing in a very simple, rural African life.

Sometimes we forget how overindulged we are with our grand houses, multiple cars and supermarkets stuffed with foods from all over the world. In the spirit of generosity, knowing how much you already have, please think of giving to Bio-Benin so that we can help many more like Apollinaire and H  l  ne live decent lives.

On the construction side, we are finishing up the basic living quarters for ourselves, our guardian, and the chickens, providing running water plus solar-powered electricity enabling us to live completely off the grid. Guillaume promises me that the large barn we constructed for women to make the sorghum malt for his beer will soon be bustling with activity as he finally starts brewing four new types of beer, having recently upgraded all the equipment he needs. Any young children accompanying their mothers to work here will be looked after in a creche. We are also hiring day workers aplenty to cut down weeds and small shrubs before planting crops during this rainy season.



Guillaume by the lake

A minor disaster occurred two nights ago when torrential rains filled our lake and the force of the runoff started to erode the banks surrounding the "monk," which controls the outflow of water. We will need concrete and stone reinforcement to make sure it is stable, immediately, and when the dry season rolls around in October will need to dig a little deeper and reinforce a little more strongly. We estimate a total cost of between \$10,000 and \$20,000 and would greatly appreciate your help in reaching this goal. Selling fish will be one of our main sources of income to keep Bio-Benin going in the future, so we need to do it right.

Meanwhile, our chickens are busy hatching chicks, and we expect to have some 200 within a matter of months. Roses are blooming, seeds are sprouting, birds are singing, the midnight chorus of toads and frogs around the pond is raucus! Everywhere I turn I find new signs of life as the rains bring everything back into its full glory. We are even thinking ahead to having beehives and will be planting plenty of flowering trees to keep them happy.



Flamboyant Tree



Passionfruit flower

Once we have enough funding to get beyond our immediate needs, we plan to build dormitories and a kitchen for students learning how to farm organically. We also need an open-air auditorium for lectures and lessons and several guesthouses for paying visitors. They can, if they wish, work alongside our agricultural students to help with planting, tilling or harvesting at different times of the year. In off hours, visitors can go to the nearby Pendjari Safari Park and visit the local museum and famous Tata Somba of the Ottamarri people, who are also known for their dramatic tribal dances, which are frequently on display.



Tata Somba houses of the Ottamarri

This is an almost perfect life, but we need your help to make it even better and allow us to reach out to many more people and change their lives. The restaurant survived the pandemic and is slowly welcoming more and more clients each day. We have a new chef, Wahabou, to help take some of the burden of cooking from Guillaume's shoulders and he is busy trying to pass on all his well-honed skills and knowledge of excellent cooking. Everything is

moving forward, sometimes frustratingly slowly and with many stops and starts as something needs to be redone, sometimes over and over, before the workers get it right. Deep in my heart I know that we will succeed and have already come a long way together over the past nine years.

If you can find it in your heart to help us, we welcome whatever you can give. Please visit our website at www.bio-benin.org and click on the Donate button, where you will be instructed on how to make a donation through PayPal or by check.

Thank you for your generosity. We look forward to hearing from you.

Julie and Guillaume