



Video Story Transcript

A GIFT FROM REFUGEE CHILDREN

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-QEISLpunE>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Charlotte Blake Alston. Do you ever notice that sometimes you can really struggle to get to the essence of something? And the lesson comes from, like, the least of these. For me, often it comes from children and this is one of those times.

In 1988 in response to increasing tension between the African-American and Jewish communities in Philadelphia, two prominent individuals, one from each community. Reverend William H. Gray, who was then Majority Whip of Congress at that time, and George M. Ross, who was chairman of the American Jewish Committee Chapter Philadelphia, came together to see if they could address these issues and come up with some kind of a way to diminish the tension. What they created was a program for young people with an international component that, I think, they probably thought they would institute for a year or two. The summer of 2012 will mark the 27th year.

Students from both communities, after, uh, an application and interview process, get an opportunity to come together. They live very closely together. Some have never spent that much time with someone from the other community and had the opportunity to ask the questions that were on their minds and on their hearts and deal with some of the difficult issues that even adults have difficulty wrestling with.

They travel together to Senegal and Gambia in West Africa. They learn about the history, the culture, the traditions of the people. They are taught basic greetings in the indigenous language of Wolof. So, when they greet people, they're greeting them in their own languages. We eat in people's homes; they have interactions

with young people there. They also travel to Israel and learn about the history, the culture, the traditions and all of the complexities of the problems that are so difficult to resolve.

I had the good fortune of accompanying a group for two consecutive years. So, my chaperone and I, along with the students who are taking this trip the summer before their senior years of high school, walk through the cramped spirit-filled dirt floor rooms of the slave castles on Goree Island, just off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, where people saw their last glimpse of African soil before they were placed into the holds of ships and shipped off to Europe and the Americas. In Jerusalem, we go to the museum, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, where we really get immersed in a visceral experience of the depths of human (*in*)cruelty taken to its worst possible extreme.

When we were in Israel, we were met by two young Israeli students who were going to be our junior guides. When they found out that on our itinerary was a trip to the Arab village of Dobariya, they got really apprehensive. One of them said, "My mother does not want me to go. She is afraid."

Well, I sensed that the fear was not just her mother but Dalia's as well. She fidgeted nervously every time she spoke about it. So, the very next morning, as we boarded the bus, there she came. She showed up at the hotel, boarded the bus. I said, "Are you sure?"

She said, "Yes, if this is what your group stands for. I want to give it a try."

So, we arrived in the village of Dobariya. We were met by some village elders, some, uh, politicians, and some young people, some teenagers as well. We were taken to a private home where we were served tea and sweets and listened to the experiences of Arab-Israeli citizens and what it was like for them to live in Israel. Dalia struck up a conversation with one of the Arab teenagers and after a few moments, we heard both of them giggling. Dalia was just surprised; she was really excited. It turned out that both girls had attended the same school and had gone to a special camp together and had much in common. They chatted away for the rest of the day. And she joined with us when we joined hands with men, women, and children in Dobariya. And we formed our own sort of hands across Dobariya line and sang, "We are the World."

When we got back to the hotel, she said, "I'm so glad that I came."

Well, one of the visits that we had to Senegal, we took a departure from our normal itinerary and went to a refugee camp in Senegal's northern area, right near the border of Mauritania. For a number of years, it's been a system of slavery in Mauritania. And in 1988, large numbers of people were kicked out of the country and crossed the border into Senegal. They were being housed in these structures that normally housed grain. And we were told that there were many children there. So, the woman who put together our itinerary had taken some money from her organization to purchase some bread and other supplies. And she thought that this might be a good experience for our students. I wasn't so sure about this. It was not on the itinerary and an Operation Understanding itinerary was anything but typical under normal circumstances. But we went to a store and we bought, uh, wiffle balls and wiffle bats (little plastic bats), and nerf frisbees, and nerf footballs, and bags and bags of candy. And the van took us as far as it could. We got off the van and we began to walk.

And I don't know what my students were thinking but their faces, the expressions on them, seemed to reflect what I was feeling. I just had my head down and was just focusing on the sound of our shoes as it hit the sand on the dusty road and the clouds of dust billowing up. And after a moment, in the distance, we noticed another dust cloud kinda... kind of coming towards us. And then we heard singing coming from the dust cloud. The dust cleared and it was children. Children from the refugee camp had come to greet us. They were clapping and they were singing. And they took our hands and they walked us into an area where there were

hundreds more children seated on the ground. They left us and went and sat down to join those children. Well, a man, who seemed to be in charge, motioned us to an area opposite the children, facing them and I thought that he was telling us to sit down. We didn't quite understand what he was saying so I motioned for my students to sit. And then some women came over and motioned for us to stand up and some of them left the area. So, I motioned for the students to stand up. We stood up once again. And then finally our guide, our translator, Boule, came and said, "Ah, the children have a gift for you. They want to present you with a piece of theater; you are their guests."

The women who had left the area came back and spread fabric on the ground. He said, "They didn't want you to sit down on the dirt."

Well, the children presented a wonderfully funny and inventive stiff skit. It was not in English but it was clear to understand. A ch... a young chief had gone to the French school in the vi... city to learn how to rule his people. And he returned to the village with piles of textbooks. And, one after another, people would come to him with problems. And he would sort through the textbook to find the page and the chapter that he could tell them what they should do from the textbook. And a series of funny mishaps occurred until the marabout, the spiritual man came and reconnected him with his ancestors and the ancestral traditional ways of doing things.

We had come clear across the ocean to uncover our cultural, ethnic, religious roots to peel back the layers of assumption, myth, misunderstanding. To get to the essence of our commonalities and the struggle to claim and retain an identity here on American soil, these children, in our western way of thinking, had nothing - less than nothing. What they gave us was the greatest gift of all mankind and that was themselves, joyfully and s..., apparently, with the understanding that we are all undeniably human. They brought home to us once again that we can, at any moment, make the choice to use the gifts that we have been given to lift and transform mankind.

We didn't drop our supplies and leave. We just couldn't do that. We owed them so much more than that. I stood in the midst of several hundred children separated from their families. No, uh, nati... national identity and led with the help of my translator, several call and response songs including Ella Jenkins, "Did You Feed My Cow? Yes, Ma'am." We stayed far into the night. Our students played wiffle ball and threw frisbees and showed them how to run bases. Girls kept coming up playing handclapping games. And we listened to, uh, elders tell their stories, translated by our guide. Helped them prepare food, all while children kept running up to me tapping me and singing out, "Yessa, Ma'am." The song was as treasured a gift as the candy, which was now... all... gone.