

## **Kelly Cunnane Returns Home After Year in Africa**

### ***Beals Woman Taught English to Mauritians***

**By Nancy Beal ~ Published in The Downeast Coast Press, week of September 15-21, 2009**

Four years ago, when the last of her four children entered high school, Kelly Cunnane began asking herself, “What’ll I do when my kids are grown up?” Already the published author of a prize-winning book and a disciplined writer who works mornings in her Great Wass Island home overlooking the islands in Beals’ Western Bay, since moving to Beals with her physician husband, Sam Hunkler, she had held various workshops and part-time jobs—some volunteer—teaching art, drama and writing from elementary school to college.

But it was her earlier work experience that Cunnane called upon and which led her to a year-long, full-time position as the teacher of English to Mauritians in the West African coastal capitol of Nouakchott. Before becoming a wife and mother, Cunnane had been a Peace Corps volunteer, spending time in far corners of the world such as China, Africa and South America, often teaching English as a second language.

After settling in Beals, Kelly and Sam took their children to live in Africa for a year in the Kenyan village where Kelly had spent time in the Peace Corps. Upon their return, they brought a Kenyan boy who would live with them as an exchange student and help Kelly produce a play at Beals Elementary School based on her book, “For You Are a Kenyan Child,” for which she won the 2006 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award.

Throughout her extensive travels, Cunnane says, “None of the cultures grabbed me like Africa.” Although her time in Kenya had acquainted her with East Africa, she had never been to the western part of Africa nor experienced the sands of the Sahara Desert. A colleague told her about the English Language Center in Nouakchott, Mauritania and, three years ago, she began an email correspondence with the founder about a possible teaching job. The conversation was interrupted by violent changes of government but, after a telephone interview followed by an in-person conversation in Bar Harbor a year ago, Cunnane says she was offered the job—if she could be ready to go in three weeks. By late September, 2008, she was on her way.

#### **A Bit of History**

Mauritania is a large, odd-shaped country on the bulge of Africa’s northwestern coast, surrounded inland by Algeria on the northeast, Mali on the east and south, Senegal on the southwest, and Morocco-controlled Western Sahara on the northwest. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it has been an Islamic country and, despite nearly a century of French colonization that ended in 1960, Sunni Islam prevails today as the main religion (French is the business language), and the country calls itself the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

According to information on the Internet, much of its unsettled political history since independence in 1960 can be attributed to ethnic differences between the main three population groups: the light Moors who held sway in the north, the dark Moor Haratins whom they enslaved, and non-Moor black Africans who began moving north of the Senegal River after 1970 and whose education and knowledge of French enabled them to claim most of the professional positions. Although slavery was been officially banned in the 1980s, it still exists throughout the country, and Cunnane says Haratins can be seen living in tent towns or acting as house sitters for buildings under construction.

Bloodless coups d’etat mark Mauritania’s political history. The country’s first fully democratic presidential election in 2007 was eradicated the following year in a coup organized by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Last July, after resigning his military commission, Aziz was elected

in his own right and rules today. (Cunnane says his program of public improvements makes him popular with her students.)

Nouakchott, a sprawling city of sand streets that reaches five kilometers inland, was hastily constructed after independence when 90 percent of its population was still nomadic. Its North Atlantic waters harbor some of the world's richest fishing grounds, and an oil boom took off after reserves were discovered offshore in 2001.

Life expectancy in Mauritania is less than 54 years, and 20 percent of the population lives on less than \$1.25 per day, according to information on the Internet.

### **Her School**

English Language Center had a staff that averaged eight, including part-time teachers, and 130 adult students. Curriculum followed the *Headway Series*, an Oxford-produced program Cunnane praises as "thorough and top-knotch." It consisted of exercises in reading, speaking, listening and writing. She started carrying four classes—each a two-hour class held three times a week—a children's program and a private student, a course load that lightened somewhat as the year went on. Working hours were from 2 to 9 p.m., and dinner was at 10. "My days started later," she said. Her salary was \$700 per month and included lodging and one meal a day at the school.

Her students tended to be educated professionals. During the year, among her students she counted an architect, a female pediatrician, as well as business owners, a Spanish embassy guard, a woman home from Paris, and several African girls. (The Chinese were "everywhere," she says, building right and left, but somehow distant from the Mauritians. She had none in her classes.)

The dominant languages spoken in Mauritania are French for commerce, and a variety of Arabic tribal languages, some very guttural, chief among which are Wolof, Pulaar and Soninke.

Everything, including school, stopped five times a day for Islamic prayer. The men prayed "in herds," says Cunnane, the women privately.

### **Her Routine**

For living quarters, Cunnane and her fellow teachers were given a typical Moroccan house, complete with a tiled courtyard, on the outskirts of Nouakchott, a 25-minute walk through sandy streets to school. Her housemates were men and women from Mauritania, Ivory Coast, and the United States.

Facilities were what she calls "basic:" cold water in which one hand washed one's laundry, and a gas stove with an oven that didn't work. Although some of her housemate used the kitchen to prepare full meals, Cunnane tended to eat out with her students—"The fish is fantastic!" she says—or make sandwiches at home. (French bread was delivered by donkey at 6 a.m. each morning.) The Mauritians always shared the tea they brewed on portable burners all carried with them, she says. They also shared holiday celebrations—with a roasted sheep the usual center of the feast.

Nouakchott is the only city within 500 kilometers. A fishing town noted for its colorfully painted, long dories, it has no museums, libraries or recreational outlets. Cunnane spent a lot of time with her students, eating the local fare of fish, lamb, rice and couscous. The vegetables were "horrible," she says, because they all had to be imported into a city built on sand.

Life in the Sahara was "placid," she says, "unless you were in politics or behind the wheel of a car." It was too hot to go hiking (in the heat that often hit 100° Fahrenheit, she says she learned to walk slowly), and driving out of the city without a licensed guide was forbidden because of the many people who had gotten lost and perished in the shifting sands. Cunnane liked to climb to the roof of her house and look out over the dunes. "They're magnificent," she says, "and you

know nature is ruling.” Without intending to pun, she says the ubiquitous sand, although it got into everything and needed sweeping twice a day, blew her away.

Part and parcel with the sand was the lack of rain. Cunnane, who filled 10 journals during her stay, reports experiencing only three 15-minute rain showers from the time of her arrival in September, 2008 until the following July. From mid-July to last month when she left, there was one downpour that flooded the streets. She and her housemates had a cistern in the cellar of their house, fed by a reservoir.

### **Her Impressions**

“The way people dressed!” says Cunnane instantly when asked her favorite things about her stay in Mauritania. The malafas worn by women as veils and men as turbans, the boubous (voluminous pirate pants), in the folds of which men carried their ever-present cell phones, typify the country in her mind’s eye.

Although women always covered their heads in public, she says she didn’t sense that they were oppressed, but rather that the malafa was an expression of their culture and practical protection against the wind and sand. When she expressed dismay that malafas on the beach prevented women from going in the water, she learned from her students that young men in the family considered it their duty to accompany their sisters to private beaches where they could bathe bare headed.

Out of respect for the culture, Cunnane kept her legs covered, always wearing long skirts to school. She wore malafas as shawls, and brought several colorful ones home with her.

Mauritanian women don’t work, says Cunnane, but they seemed to have money and do a lot of shopping. Men are permitted to have four wives, but only with the consent of the first wives.

Divorce is common, she says. She saw no women smoking, a habit common among men.

While the populace seemed well off—big cars, houses, “lots of stuff”—Cunnane says the public services were nearly non-existent. Trash, including dead animals, was dumped in the desert, and public transportation consisted of old Mercedes that would go anywhere for a dollar, and battered vans that transported the common folk for much less.

Violence was never far from the surface. Kidnappings were common, and embassies issued frequent warnings to their citizens. During her stay, the murder of an American prompted the evacuation of Peace Corps volunteers, always suspect as spies in Mauritania. Two weeks before she left, the French embassy was nearly blown up and, she says, Al Qaida is trying to get a foothold there.

### **Coming Home**

Cunnane credit email with keeping her in touch with her family during the year she was in Mauritania. Like other services, it worked on and off. She made one trip home—for the college graduation of her second child—and was tempted to stay were it not for the paid plane fare promised to those employees of the English Language Center who stayed a full year.

Now that she has completed her obligation to the school, Cunnane, who is again looking for meaningful employment, muses that she would enjoy being a cultural educator, so that she could bring her photos, clothes and artifacts into schools and give students a hands-on experience of another culture. Her African students were educated and political, she says, “aware of their place in the world, more aware of us than we are of them.” Cunnane would like to impart some of that awareness to students in her homeland.