Hello everyone, welcome to the final newsletter from my year of service in Senegal. It has been an incredible experience living in a new culture this year, even if I did leave prematurely due to these unprecedented times. I have been home in Fresno for about a month after our evacuation, so here are some reflections on my transition back to America and the life I leave behind in Senegal.

Welcome Back to America

This transition back home has been quite the roller coaster. The process began mid-March, when our YAGM cohort received the news that we were all being evacuated due to the coronavirus. Originally, we were each given one week to pack our belongings and say goodbye to our host communities. However, as concern for the virus began to spread more rapidly, our timeline was moved up dramatically (only two days) in order for us to leave our communities. The realization that I was not able to say goodbye and see all of my friends and family in the community that shaped and supported me for seven months, was tough to say the least. My leaving felt abrupt and my time unfinished. As the YAGM gathered in the capital, it was reported that Senegal was planning on closing their borders and airports in just a few short days after our initial call. Flights were cancelled and rebooked and our team quickly put our things together. Our cohort was split into two groups and flightpaths, with my group flying two long haul flights to Istanbul and JFK, then I flew independently back to California. After a few days in the air I finally arrived in Fresno. When I saw my mom for the first time at the airport I felt what I can only describe as a whirlwind of emotions. I was home, tired from the journey and unsure what the future held for me. Reflecting on the rush and anxiety I felt through the evacuation experience, I can only express the upmost gratitude toward the YAGM team in Chicago. It was a tough call to make to bring all volunteer programs home and they experienced an incredible amount of stress arranging return travel, however throughout the entire process the YAGM team was always supportive, helpful, and encouraging. Love you Global Mission!

When I first imagined coming back to America and transitioning to life here again, I thought those first few days were going to be the hardest. In some ways this turned out to be true. I was in an America that looked completely unfamiliar to me: empty, panic spreading as people rushed to grocery stores, the inability to leave my own home and greet my friends and family I so dearly
missed. At the same time, however, I was also able to breathe a sigh of relief knowing that my long journey home was now completed and I had made it back safely/without getting sick. I was able to jump back into life with my mom, dad, and sister. And sleeping in my own bed again was one of the greatest feelings in the world! As time has progressed though, I have realized that the toughest part of the transition back home was not stepping off the plane but the long term effects of the changes I experienced in myself and how that now fit within the society I came from. How will my thoughts on environmental and social justice, diversity, faith, and more fit within my old context and how can I continue to be shaped by the community around me? In some ways I am thankful to be stuck in my house, slowly working through these thoughts and feelings before being fully thrust back into the fast-paced American lifestyle. It is going to take some time to fully process everything that shaped me as a YAGM, but I am looking forward to the opportunity to go and share my experiences with my supporters in person when the time comes.

As I mentioned, there is a lot that still needs to be processed about the seven months I lived in Senegal and the abrupt way it came to an end. I am still grieving at the loss of time and relationships, the opportunity to give a full goodbye to some of my friends, and the “unfinished business” I left at my office. One way it has been possible to express these feelings has been through continuous support of my YAGM Senegal cohort. We are still connecting by video call in order to work through re-entry materials, express our truest emotions, and build each other up in such a stressful time. I truly love this group of people, they have been my rock. In our time at home, our group desires to continue and uplift the work we were doing in Senegal before the evacuation. One way we have done so is through our participation in the Triduum Project: a live stream that took place over the three Holy Days leading up to Easter. The YAGM Senegal team was able to share some Senegalese culture by cooking, singing in Wolof, and teaching Serer. Although we were all in quarantine it was an awesome first opportunity to share some of our lives with our community back home in America. If you are interested see the YAGM Senegal video visit our blog at: http://yagmsenegal.wixsite.com/blog.

So where does all of this leave me now? Well, for the foreseeable future I will be living with my family in California, practicing social distancing. I have been starting to volunteer locally in order to feel connected to my community again and also to continue to live the rest of this year in service, even if the location has changed. If the number of COVID-19 cases start to shrink, it is my hope to work at a camp this summer, building community and having some good ole fashion fun with my campers. As for the long term future, things are still working themselves out. I am
considering going back to school to pursue a graduate degree and am also applying for other jobs. While this virus has changed so much in all of our lives, I am confident things will come together. If there is any one lesson I learned in Senegal that is helping me the most right now, it is lean into the ambiguity! It is important to be flexible. In the end, YAGM has shaped my goals in the future to continue to work in non-profit, build meaningful relationships, and advocate for justice in my community. If I can accomplish this in my next stage in life, I would consider this a success no matter what shape that opportunity or future might take.

**My Incredible Senegalese Family: Penda**

For my last newsletter check-in, I wanted to leave you all with a story of one of the amazing people who shaped and supported me while I lived in Senegal. Although I made so many incredible friends, my site-supervisor Penda left an undeniable impression on me.

Penda was my site supervisor/manager at the program I worked for in Foundiougné. She was also my downstairs neighbor. Because we worked and basically lived together, we had a lot of time to get to build our friendship. I am so appreciative to Penda for several reasons. First, in the workplace, she showed me the perseverance it takes to work in a small non-profit operating on a fixed budget. There were many tough decisions that had to be made in order to run our office efficiently. Penda took the time to explain her decision making processes to me and shaped the way I thought about a future career in non-profit. Also, Penda showed me how to be a powerful and confident woman in the workplace. As a woman with a position of power in a male dominated culture, there were many times she faced doubt from others/men. However, Penda continued to push through and prove that she was (is) strong, intelligent, and capable. Her life and call to vocation is inspiring to me and something I hope to channel into my own career.

The second reason I am appreciative of Penda is her willingness to answer any and all of my questions about life, language, and culture in Senegal. There were so many times when our day turned into an hours long discussion about poverty or gender instead of what we initially set out to work on. These talks were always more informative than I could ever imagine, and I am grateful she took a chance on an American volunteer to welcome into her country’s life and perspectives. It is people like Penda that made my whole YAGM journey worth it. And although I am sad our time was cut short, I will never forget my site-supervisor, neighbor, and friend, Penda.

**Thank you, merci, and jëréjëf for the continuous support! Peace and blessings always,**

Charlie
A YAGM friend created a “Spirit Week” to pass the quarantine time, here is my mom and I participating on twins day!

Saying goodbye to my community on my last day in Foundiougne. This is my auntie, Binta

My last plate of the delicious ceebu jenn, the national dish of Senegal

Saying goodbye to the Catholic church I worshipped in for the seven months I lived in Foundiougne

Scenic Senegal
Here are some of my favorite images from Senegal and the journey back home to America.

Making attaya for my family in America

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