



Out of Africa: One woman's battle to save a young girl

Her students may think of her as just a ballet teacher, but if you knew Blandine Lamaison's "extraordinary story from beginning to end", you'd be nothing less than inspired. Here, she tells Jade Impleton-Jackman.

Curled up on the sofa in her North West London home, still wearing her dance shoes from her earlier classes, the French 55 year-old mother of two (now three) tells me how her 2002 two week holiday to Guinea led to her struggle of "getting an African child out of Africa" for urgent treatment in Paris. "It was in the middle of nowhere," she recalls. "We didn't have consistent electricity

or running water and we were frightfully bored because we had absolutely nothing to do."

Blandine and her family had gone to visit the home of her nephew's new bride. It was in Timbi Madina, a small village in Fouta Djallon, where she first met 15 year-old Aissatou Bah, her nephew's wife's niece along with the other children in the family who would come home from school everyday to help cook and clean. Little did she know then but her life was about to change.

"She was a lovely girl with a sense of humour and a twinkle in her eye. There was something special about her," she remembers with a grin on her face. And indeed there was. Aissatou was one of those rare exceptions that was born without AIDS even though her mother had contracted it before she was pregnant. Consequently, both her parents

died from the disease, leaving her to be brought up by her grandfather.

After establishing, what Blandine calls a "fairly superficial relationship" with Aissatou, she returned home to London. Born and educated in France, Blandine moved to London and founded La Sylvaine School of Dance in 1979. Even though she has set up home in London, she explains that she often returns to Paris to visit her family and friends. "Once we got home, we decided that we would keep in regular contact and send money to the kids whenever we could. £100 for them goes a very long way, it feeds the whole family for a month."

In June of the following year, 6 months after Blandine's visit, Aissatou's grandfather died and so she had to go and live with one of her aunts in Conakry, the country's capital. Blandine

received a telegram informing her that the young girl had fallen ill and needed money in order to be treated. "She had lost sight in one of her eyes and become weak, which made everyone believe she had Malaria."

A month later, Blandine received a letter from Aissatou herself. "She sent me a letter saying she was basically living in a cardboard box in a corner of a room at her aunts and urged me to stop sending money but instead bring her over to France."

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Blandine's nephew was visiting Conakry when he saw Aissatou and rang to tell her that didn't think she would last another two weeks. "After I had received that call, I thought I just can't live with myself if I don't at least try to do something about it."

That's when Blandine put everything into motion. She rang a professor in Paris, a childhood friend of hers who said that he would treat and examine Aissatou for free if she could get her to him.

That was the next step, the biggest hurdle for her to overcome. Blandine sent money to Aissatou's uncle, asking him to buy everything that was needed such as a passport, a date of birth, vaccination documents and her parents' name.

"I remember that I had read a book called 'Princesse des Rugo' which was a story about a woman Esther Kamatari who had gotten 200 children out of

Burundi and I thought: well why her and not me? I don't see why I can't get one out," she says. She recalled reading in the book that Air France offers free tickets for children in need so her next step was to contact them.

"I sent 15 or 20 faxes on the Sunday afternoon from my little bedroom and on Monday morning, I had an answer from Air France. The right person had picked it up at the right time and put it on the desk of the right

organised, you can count on us," she says triumphantly.

The airline had offered Blandine a return ticket to Conakry for Aissatou however, this was mid May of 2004 and a strike was scheduled to start with Air France at the end of the month. This meant that she had little time to find Aissatou a visa in order to get her on a flight.

The French Embassy wanted to see the girl's birth certificate and the death certificates of her parents. "I didn't know what to do because it was all impossible to get a hold of," she says in an annoyed voice. "They don't

have birth certificates in Conakry, let alone death certificates.

They put you in a hole in the jungle and that's it. It was my word against theirs."

With no luck on the French

Embassy front and only 4 days left to get Aissatou's visa, Blandine's last bid was to contact the French Consulate and speak to the head. She says, "I told him the story and I said it's my word and that's it so I understand if you don't believe me but if you do, you might be saving a child." Coincidentally, his childhood friend ran the embassy in Conakry and told Blandine that the visa would be ready for Aissatou at the embassy at 9am the following morning.

"All she had with her was a pair of plastic shoes, a loincloth, underwear, one jacket and a plastic handbag. She was put on a plane first class with a chaperone and my nephew went to pick her up from Paris," says Blandine.

The fight to get Aissatou over to Paris was over but the journey of finding her a school and treating her illness had only just begun.

A social worker in Paris had urged Blandine to find a school for the now 17 year-old whilst health tests were being carried out. The dance teacher got in contact with the school she had attended in Paris and was able to get Aissatou into a younger class and into extra lessons as her written French wasn't up to the standard of her age group. However Blandine had to go back to London and she didn't know where Aissatou was going to stay.

"Once you've saved one child, you feel like you've saved the world"

"At this point, my parents didn't want to take her because

they felt it was a big responsibility so the only option was to make her board so I asked the headmaster and there was

one space left in the halls. It all fell into place.”

The only thing holding Blandine back now was having to find £3000, which she didn't have so she emailed all of her friends, family and ballet students asking them to donate anything they could. She says, “Everybody sent from £10 to £500 and in about a week, I had two thirds of her boarding paid for one year.”

Before starting school in September, Aissatou had a major health crisis. She fainted and was brought to the A&E lifeless. Various tests were carried out but they still couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. It wasn't until March 2005, that her diagnosis was confirmed. She had congenital toxoplasmosis, which meant “her mother caught the cat flu when she was pregnant and passed it onto Aissatou,” explains Blandine.

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“Normally when you have it, you're born deaf or blind.”

Protozoa either invade a foetus and eat it but sometimes in exceptional cases they do not

attack and develop into a cyst. These cysts then stay in your system and will explode and attack your body if your immune system goes down. This first happened when Aissatou's grandfather died as she was upset and weak. A cyst exploded and the protozoa organisms

attacked her spine, causing her to faint and give her meningitis.

“Originally I thought we would bring her over, help her get treatment and then send her back,” she says. But Blandine's plans didn't materialise how she had expected them to and now six years on, Aissatou is a prominent member of the Lamaison family. After spending several months in hospital and making a miraculous recovery, Aissatou achieved such high grades at school that her teachers encouraged her to pursue medicine. She's currently in her second year of medical school and Blandine couldn't be happier with the result. She adds, “Once you've saved one child, you feel like you've saved the world.”



Photo: Blandine and Aissatou