

WHY HAS
MANUEL BEEN
NOMINATED?

Manuel Rodrigues

Manuel Rodrigues has been nominated for the World's Children's Prize for his 20-year fight for blind children and children with other disabilities in Guinea-Bissau.

Children with disabilities in Guinea-Bissau are among the world's most disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Through Manuel and his organization AGRICE, they get to live a life with dignity. They receive medical care, food, a home, the opportunity to go to school, security and love. Manuel talks to politicians, other organizations and most of all rural communities about the rights of children with disabilities. Without Manuel, people in rural villages would not receive this information. Thanks to Manuel's work, children and adults know that children with visual impairments and other disabilities have the same rights as everyone else. Manuel's fight has saved these children from being mistreated, abandoned, or even killed. 250 blind children have lived at Manuel's centre and attended his school, which has been adapted for people with visual impairments. The aim is for these children to move back in with their families after receiving education and training from Manuel. Most of these families are poor, and the children receive support from AGRICE after moving home so that they can continue their education and have a good life in their village.



Manuel, who has been blind since the age of three, with blind children who now have a brighter future thanks to Manuel and his organisation AGRICE.

Manuel strokes the girl's head gently. Adelia, 9, leans against him on the bench where they are sitting. When she was a newborn baby, she was left to die in the forest because she is blind.

"That makes me sad and angry. Unfortunately, Adelia is not an exception. The situation in Guinea-Bissau for children who are blind or have other disabilities is terrible. Many people see these children as worthless, so they don't give them love or let them go to school. My life is all about fighting for these children," says Manuel.

Manuel knows how much a child with a disability needs care and love from the adults in their life, and not to be let down and abandoned. He knows this because he himself lost his sight at the age of three.

"I grew up in an ordinary family with lots of children. There were nine of us, and my mother Ana-Maria and my father Luis loved us all. My dad and I were best friends. We walked hand in hand to

preschool every day, and we played together a lot. We went swimming and played ball sports. Even though I was little, we usually wore matching clothes. I remember my father was always happy."

When Manuel was three, something happened that changed everything.

"My eyes, which had been brown, started to turn blue, and everything started to look blurred. I found it harder and harder to play and get around, and



Manuel with Adelia, who was left in the forest to die as a baby, but was rescued by some shepherds. Since then, Manuel and his wife have taken care of Adelia and given her a home, love, and an education.





Both blind and sighted children attend Manuel's 'White Cane' school and they play together at break times.



I had to stop going to pre-school because I couldn't see well enough. This made me really sad. But my father was even sadder. He cried almost all the time."

The long journey

Manuel's father refused to accept that his son had become blind. He decided to make sure Manuel received the best medical care he could find. But that was not in Guinea-Bissau, but in

Portugal, where his brother lived. He started to contact people who might be able to help. And he started saving as much money as he could from his army pay check. There was less food on the table for the whole family. But they persevered, and finally managed to get a flight ticket to get Manuel to his uncle in Portugal. But nobody else in the family could afford to go with him.

"It wasn't easy for me. I was

only four, and I was sad and afraid. But I was lucky. There was a nun on the flight who helped me, and at the hospital there were nurses called Judite and Lurdes who cared for me. They comforted me, read books and sang songs, just as my parents would have done."

Manuel had high hopes that the doctors in Europe would be able to help him get his sight back.

"But after a year in hospital, they told me that there was nothing they could do to fix my visual impairment, which is called glaucoma. The medical treatment had come too late."

School for the blind

Once again, it was Manuel's father who was the most upset. But he kept fighting for his son. He had found out that there were good schools for blind children in

15-year-old created braille

Braille was created in 1824 by a 15-year-old French boy called Louis Braille. Braille is a series of raised dots within small squares (cells) on sheets of paper or plastic, which people touch and read using both index fingers. Every character consists of up to 6 dots. Different letters are formed by different combinations of dots in the square. Braille can also be used to denote numbers and music notes. World Braille Day is celebrated on 4 January every year, in memory of Louis Braille's birth in 1809.

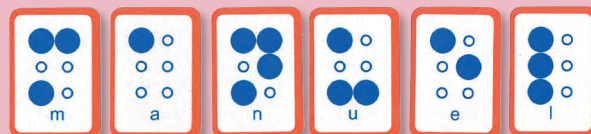


Blind children at Manuel's school learn to read and write for the first time in their lives with the help of braille.



A plastic template with squares that the paper is inserted into to write with the stylus.

A stylus, used for braille writing.



This is Manuel's name in braille.



Manuel's old school made of bamboo.



New children's centre

"Right now we're building a new centre for the children. My old house is too small and I want the children to have an environment that is more adapted for them. In addition to bedrooms, the new centre will have a playground, a sports hall, an area to grow our own vegetables and raise chickens and goats. At the centre we'll have courses such as journalism, administration, computers, sewing and cooking for the young people," says Manuel.



Manuel talks as often as possible to journalists, on the radio and to politicians, about how children with disabilities have the same rights as all other children.

Isabel, 14, lost her sight as a young girl. After spending time at Manuel's centre, she has now moved back home to live with her grandmother Fatumata and attends a mainstream school. Manuel's goal is for all children to be able to return to their families.



Portugal, but that they were expensive. There was not a single school for blind children in Guinea-Bissau, so once again Manuel's father began saving money to help him.

"The family managed to raise enough for me to go to a boarding school in Portugal. Although I missed my family, I was really happy there. I learned to count, read and write using braille. At school I also learned practical skills, like getting dressed, washing and brushing my teeth. And I made lots of new friends. My best friend was called António and in our free time we played football and went swimming."

Heartbreak

The years passed, and Manuel learned how to live as a blind person. Maybe life was going to be fine after all. But one day, after six years at the school, Manuel received another life-changing message. His father had died suddenly from a heart attack.

"I was ten years old and I lost both my father, and the chance to continue with my education, since nobody else was able to pay my school fees. I took the boat home to Africa and I was devastated the whole way."

When Manuel arrived the country was at war. Guinea-Bissau was fighting to be liberated from colonial power

Portugal, which had been in charge. The family took Manuel to safety with relatives in neighbouring Guinea. There, he was able to attend a school for children and young people with disabilities. Six years later, Guinea-Bissau became independent and Manuel returned home.

Stopped the president

Guinea-Bissau was poor and ravaged by war. Manuel's family had to survive on whatever his mother managed to sell at the market. Manuel, who was sixteen, realised that he needed to get

a job and help out. Nobody believed that a blind person could get a job, but Manuel walked to the presidential palace every day and asked to speak to the president. He believed that the president should help him and other people with disabilities to find work. Every day, he was told it was not possible to meet the president. But he kept going.

"One day I managed to stand in the way of the president's car so he had to stop! The president's guards took me to him. I explained that I needed help to get a job, since nobody employed blind people. I said that I had learned to work as a switchboard operator at school in Guinea. The president was curious, and he let me try out the switchboard in the presidential office. When I passed the test he was so impressed that he arranged a job for me at the head office of the postal service!"

"Our goal is that all children, even children who are blind or have another disability, have chances in life and hope for the future. All children should feel that they matter and they belong in society," says Manuel.

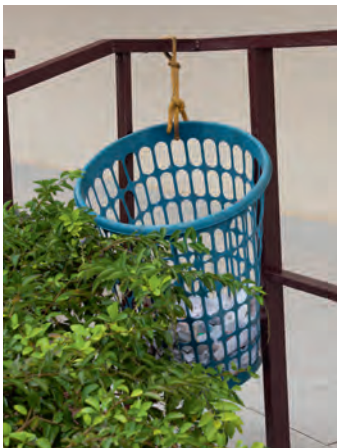




Manuel tells a story to the children. Abdulai, who is sitting on Manuel's knee, was found just a week ago, when Manuel was out on a rescue mission.

➔ Became a businessman

A year later, the president was deposed in a coup, a new telephone system was installed and Manuel lost his job. But he didn't give up. He had managed to save some money and he decided to become a businessman instead. Manuel bought school resources, toiletries and drinks in the city, which he then sold in rural areas. He used the money to buy palm oil and timber, which he then sold in the city.



"It was tough work, but I liked it. After a while it was going so well that I was able to buy an old car, employ a driver and start a taxi company too. Finally, I had managed to save so much money that I was able to build a beautiful house for my family. It felt fantastic to give that to my mother, after everything she had done for me."

AGRICE

Although Manuel was doing well, he didn't forget the blind children in the country who had not had the same opportunities that he had had. Who didn't have parents

Adapted litter bin

Lots of things at the school have been adapted to make life easier for people with visual impairments. For example, the bins are hanging up instead of being on the ground, so that nobody trips over them. And you can use the rope to feel where to throw rubbish.

who loved them. And who hadn't been able to go to school because their parents thought it was a waste of money, since blind people couldn't work anyway, or even help out at home.

"Many were kept hidden, or abandoned. Some people even thought that blind children were possessed by evil spirits, and they were left in the forrest to die. And the government still hadn't provided a single school in the entire country that was adapted for blind students," says Manuel.

So in 1996 Manuel started an organisation called AGRICE (Associação Guineense de Reabilitação e Integração de Cegos / The Guinean Association for Rehabilitation and Integration of the Blind), so that blind people could raise awareness in their society and fight for respect for their rights together.

"I wanted to show everyone that we are here, and that we have the same rights as everyone else. The right to go to school, get a job, and participate. And by being together, to make sure we don't feel alone any more."

Safe home

Through AGRICE, Manuel came into contact with many blind children whose lives were difficult. When his mother died, he decided to convert half of his house into the first safe home for blind children in Guinea-Bissau. The first people who moved in in the year 2000 were brothers Sun-car, 11 months, and Mamadi, 6.

"After their father abandoned the family, their mother was accused of being unclean, because she had given birth to blind children. She was thrown out of the village," says Manuel.

With his wife Domingas,



Home again

At Manuel's centre Isabel learned braille, and learned that she can do much more than the people around her expect. Now she lives with her family and every morning her cousin Aua helps her get to school, which was previously only for sighted children. That's how Manuel wants things to work.

Manuel took care of the two little boys. They gave them food, clothes, medical care and security. Rumours of how well the brothers were treated at Manuel's home spread, and more and more blind children started to come.

"At the same time, we started our rescue missions where we visited rural villages to look for blind children or children with other disabilities, who we knew often lived in mortal danger. We told people about the rights of the child and offered to take care of children who needed help. Soon we had over forty visually impaired children living with us!"

Manuel paid for everything for the children out of his own pocket, and it was hard to make ends meet.

White cane school

At Manuel's place, the children learned how to take care

of themselves and help their families when they returned home because Manuel's goal was for the children to return home and participate in society. They learned to wash clothes and dishes, tidy up, get dressed, cook simple meals and much more. But Manuel knew that the children needed to go to school too, just like all other children. He campaigned tirelessly for the government to start a school adapted to the needs of blind children with teachers trained in braille. He wrote letters, phoned and vis-

ited the authorities for several years. Nothing happened.

"Finally, they got tired of me. The government didn't plan to start a school, but they gave me a bit of land to build on, to shut me up I think."

Manuel and AGRICE had hardly any money, but they built a small, simple school from bamboo and palm leaves, where at first the children sat on the ground with no desks. At the same time, they trained teachers in braille.

The school was

finished in 2003 and was called 'The White Cane' (Bengala Branca), after the canes that blind people often use.

"One day the Canadian ambassador visited the school to see how we worked with our students. As we stood there in the classroom, a huge snake came slithering through the grass towards the children. The ambassador was frightened and was concerned for the children's safety. After the meeting with the snake, the embassy decided to give us money to build a safer school for the children!"



White Cane School

Manuel's school is called Bengala Branca which means White Cane. Since the 1950s, the white cane, which many blind people use to help them get around, has been the most common symbol for blind people.





On a rescue mission

Sometimes Manuel and his team have to swap their jeep for a donkey-drawn cart to get to a village where they know there are children with disabilities who are having a hard time. On arrival, Manuel is welcomed in the village. The people in the village listen as Manuel explains that children with disabilities have the same rights as all other children. He also talks about causes of blindness and how to protect your eyes from damage.

Mixed school

→ These days, none of the students sit on the floor in Manuel's school. With support from Portugal and Canada, AGRICE has built a school with six classrooms, a dining hall, a library, a music room and two craft workshops. The Department of Education in Guinea-Bissau provides teachers for Manuel. And now the school is open to all, not just students with a visual impairment. Right now there are 70 students with a visual impairment attending the school, and 177 who can see.

"It's clear to me that we should all learn together. It's a good way to prevent isolation of children with disabilities, and to help people understand that all of us have a part to play in society. We are all of equal value. At first, there were lots of families with sighted children who

thought it was strange to send their children to our school, but now we have a reputation as one of the best schools in the country and lots of people want to come," says Manuel.

Manuel's 250 children

16 years have passed since Manuel took in Suncar and Mamadi, the abandoned brothers. Since then, he has helped over 250 blind children in the same way. Today,

41 people work at AGRICE, and they give blind children a home, food, medical care, the chance to go to school, security and love. The children don't need to pay anything. Most are reunited with their families once Manuel has fully prepared their villages by telling them the best ways to care for visually impaired children. The children come from poor families and continue to receive support from

AGRICE after moving home so that they can continue their education and have a good future. Today there are 37 children living at Manuel's home, but soon there will be more, because he and AGRICE will continue their rescue missions to distant villages.

"Even though the situation for children with disabilities has become much better since we began our work, there is



I want to look good!

"When my wife Domingas isn't here to help me choose nice clothes, I use this machine which tells me the colour of each garment I place it against. So my colour combinations are not too crazy! Domingas taught me which colours go well together," says Manuel, laughing.

still much to do. We are a poor country where many people can't read because they have never been to school. That's why we need to keep spreading the word about the rights of all children out in the villages. Just a few years ago, Adelia was left to die because she was blind, and similar things still happen. That's why it's of vital importance that we are there!"

Like father like son

Sometimes Manuel feels exhausted and sad about all the terrible things that happen to children in Guinea-Bissau. But instead of giving up, he becomes even more determined to continue his work.

"At those times I think about all the chances I got in life thanks to my father. He was my best friend, and his love for me made him strive to get me the best medical care and education possible. My father is my role model. The way he treated me is the way I want to treat all the visually impaired children who need me. Like Adelia, for example. I'll keep on fighting for her rights and the rights of all other blind children for as long as I live." 🌐



Causes of blindness in Guinea-Bissau

The most common causes of blindness in Guinea-Bissau are:

River blindness (Onchocerciasis) is a parasitic infection that is spread through the bite of a black fly that lives near rivers. A parasite then produces thousands of poisonous larvae inside the body, including the eyes. It causes severe itching and damage to the eyes, which often leads to blindness. There is a vaccination against this disease.

Trachoma is an infectious disease where bacteria cause a roughening of the inner surface of the eyelids, and scar tissue grows. This infection leads, slowly and painfully, to blindness. It is

often spread by flies that have been in contact with an infected person's eyes. This is a common disease among children who live in poor, cramped conditions with a lack of clean water and covered toilets. It is preventable and treatable through better access to clean water, better hygiene, medicine and operations.

A cataract is a clouding of the lens of the eye. It can be operated on.

Glaucoma is a disease that attacks the optic nerve and leads to increased pressure in the eye. It is not possible to operate on existing damage, but medical care can prevent further damage and protect the remaining vision.

Just one eye doctor

"It is possible to prevent and treat almost all blindness*. But Guinea-Bissau is a poor country and there is only one doctor in the whole country who is an eye specialist. Many people live over 100km from the nearest health centre or hospital. People go blind because of a lack of knowledge, lack of doctors, and because they don't get treatment in time. When we are out on rescue missions, we always inform people of the causes of blindness and how to prevent eye

damage. For example, to be watchful when swimming and washing clothes in the river. We encourage people to seek medical help, and we also give out free medicine to treat the most common eye diseases. We also raise awareness via radio," says Manuel.

**80% of blindness in the world is treatable or preventable.*



School for all

Manuel's school is now regarded as one of the best in the country. It is used as a model of how children with and without disabilities can go to school and learn together.



Adelia with a small boy who is blind. When she was born, her mother left her out in the forest.

200 million children with disabilities

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children with disabilities have the same rights as all other children. They have a right to extra help and support to ensure a good life. Despite this, children with disabilities are among some of the most disadvantaged children in the world. In many countries they are not allowed to attend school and they are treated as worthless and kept hidden. There are 200 million children with disabilities in the world.

1.4 million blind children

There are 19 million visually impaired children in the world. 1.4 million of these are incurably blind, and there are an additional 500,000 new cases of child blindness every year. Out of these new cases, half of the children die within one to two years.

The work of Manuel's organization

What AGRICE does:

- They go on rural rescue missions, searching for blind children and children with other disabilities, who often have extremely difficult lives. The children are offered help at Manuel's centre.
- While on rural rescue missions, they raise awareness that children with disabilities have the same rights as all other children, and provide free medicine and information on how to prevent the most common eye diseases.
- They give visually impaired children shelter, a home, food, clothes, and security at the centre. Children also learn to be bathed and dressed, to clean, wash dishes, cook simple meals, and other life skills for independent living in the future and to be able to help their families when they return home.
- They give children medical care and eye operations where possible.
- They run the first school in the country to be adapted for the visually impaired, but open to all. AGRICE helps adapt mainstream schools all over the country so that they can accept students with different disabilities, and trains teachers in braille.
- They help children move back home. They prepare the children's families, neighbours and teachers in their villages before the children return, so that they will be welcomed in a positive way. If it is not possible for a child to be reunited with their family, they help the child to find a foster family. No child leaves Manuel's centre unless he or she is moving to a safe environment.
- They support children with school fees and school uniforms long after leaving Manuel's centre, so that they can continue their education and look forward to a good future.
- They raise awareness throughout society that children with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else. Manuel speaks on the radio and AGRICE publishes a magazine. They fight for the government to ratify (sign) the UN Convention on the Rights of all People with Disabilities.

Lots of friends

"I'm in Year Four at Manuel's school. I use both braille and the standard alphabet. At my school there are both children who can see and children who are blind. Often, children who can see help those of us who can't by telling us what the teacher has written on the board. I have lots of good friends who can see," says Samuel, who sits next to Otinelo and Assanto. ▶



Helping each other ▲

"I often help Manuel with things. Sometimes he asks me to help him when he goes out. He puts his hand on my shoulder and we walk together. Being able to help him makes me feel good," says Samuel.

Love drawing ▲

"I love drawing and I do it every day. My favourite colour is white. To be able to draw I need to have the paper very close to my eye," explains Samuel. ▼



Samuel's sight restored!

"I was abandoned by my parents because I was blind. But one day Manuel came to my village to get me. He took care of me in a way that my own parents would never have done. Thanks to him, I even have sight in one eye now! I see Manuel as a father figure and I love him," says Samuel, 12, who lives at Manuel's centre and dreams of becoming a professional footballer in Portugal.

Samuel was born into a poor family made up of his mother, father, and his older brother Solomon, whose sight was poor. When his father realised that Samuel was totally blind, he abandoned the family. Like many others, he believed that blind children were worthless because they couldn't go to school or help in the fields.

"My mother worked in the fields, and as soon as she was offered work she left my brother and me with neighbours in the village.

Sometimes she was away for several weeks at a time," says Samuel.

The neighbours didn't care for the brothers well. Samuel and Solomon were hungry, naked, dirty, and were often beaten. Samuel, who was only a baby, was left lying on the ground while Solomon stumbled around the village with no one looking after him.

"I don't know why my mother didn't carry me on her back while she was working. If a mother has a baby

who can see, then she always keeps the baby with her and breastfeeds. My mother didn't do that for me, and being left alone was bad for me. I cried constantly."

Manuel's rescue mission

Manuel found out that there were two little boys who were blind and not being cared for in the village, and he went on a rescue mission in his jeep.

"He came to get Solomon and me so that we could live with him at his centre. I was only a year old so I don't remember anything about living in the village, but Manuel tells us about our background so that we understand why we live with him."

To begin with, Samuel cried a lot. But Manuel and his wife Domingas cared for him like their own son. They



My siblings

"Jamie, Djibi and I share a room. We are like brothers. I feel safe because we have each other. Every morning I help Jamie, who is completely blind, to fetch a bucket of water so that he can wash and brush his teeth," says Samuel. ▶



back home to their families where possible. But Samuel is not convinced.

"After the operation my mother came to visit. She didn't recognise me, and I didn't recognise her. It felt strange. Manuel was the one who took care of me when I needed help. He bought me clothes and shoes, soap, shampoo, food... even biscuits and sweets sometimes! He comforted me when I was sad. He gave me love. Without him I would never have been able to go to school or get an operation so that I could see. I see Manuel as my father, and the centre as my home. And the other children as my siblings."

Professional footballer

Samuel wants to stay with Manuel for another couple of years. Then he dreams of moving far, far away...

"I love football and my greatest dream is to become a professional footballer with the Portuguese team Porto. One of the players in the team comes from Guinea-Bissau, but my favourite player is Ronaldo. If I became a famous footballer in Europe, I'd be able to play football, which I love, and earn lots of money too. I'd build a nice house and have a cool Toyota pickup. That's my dream." 🌐



Samuel, 12

Loves: Cars

Hates: Insects

Best thing that's happened: That Manuel took care of me and gave me the chance to see.

Worst thing that's happened: Being abandoned when I was little.

Looks up to: Manuel!

Wants to be: A professional footballer with Portuguese club Porto.

Dream: To own a cool Toyota pickup.

gave him food several times a day, and plenty of cuddles. One day, he stopped crying, and once he was old enough he started at Manuel's school. Manuel arranged for Samuel to have a series of eye tests, just like all the other children at the centre. The doctors discovered that he had a cataract in one eye, and wanted to operate on him.

"I was eight years old and had been blind my whole life, so I didn't know what anything looked like. All of a sudden I could see with one eye, and the first thing I saw was the ceiling fan above my hospital bed. I was terrified! But Domingas was there, she comforted me."

Able to see

When Samuel got out of bed and walked down the steps of the hospital, he was so happy that he ran round and round

the hospital garden. The nurses tried to catch him but they couldn't!

"Everything looked different from what I had imagined. For example, Manuel was much bigger than I thought! My life has become so much easier since the operation. I don't need to feel my way around all the time, or be afraid of falling and hurting myself or being knocked down by a car. I can go to the shops!"

Time to move back home?

During Samuel and Solomon's time at the centre, Manuel has worked hard to stay in touch with the boys' parents. Now that they know that Samuel can see, and they know how much Solomon has learned, the parents want the brothers to move back home. Manuel's goal is always for children to move



My brother and I

"Manuel rescued both me and my big brother Solomon. When I was little I thought Solomon could see because he was so good at walking without bumping into things. But after the operation I could see that he was blind. That made me really sad," says Samuel.

When Solomon was little he still had some sight, but he gradually became blind.

School for all children!



"Samuel and I are friends. We often play football at break time and help each other with difficult assignments in maths and science. Both blind and seeing children go to our school. I don't really think there's any difference between us. We are all the same. For me, it's obvious that blind children should be able to go to school too. Here in Guinea-Bissau, sometimes it's harder for children with a disability to go to school, because the schools have not been adapted to these children's needs. This is wrong. All schools should be suitable for all children to attend, just like our school. If you don't go to school it's hard to get a job and take care of your family. When I grow up I want to be a teacher."

Germino, 15



TEXT: ANDREAS LÖNN PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR

Come on Samuel!

There's an exciting football match underway between the boys and the girls in the yard. Manuel is the coach of the boys' team, 'Grilo', and shouts instructions to Samuel, who is the team captain. Beside Manuel is Augusto Silva the English teacher, who is coaching the girls in their team, 'N'goringor'. As usual, it's a life and death match!

"Almost all the players are blind. So we use an old soda bottle as our 'ball', because we need to be able to hear the ball to play. If we use an ordinary football then we have to put it in a plastic bag so we can hear it rustling. I prefer the ball to the bottle! We need to play here in the yard, which is surrounded by walls, so that everybody knows where the ball is," explains Samuel.

Even the two blind coaches listen out for the ball, so that they can give instructions to their players.

"Today the boys won 7-4, but next time we'll get them!" says Domingas, laughing. 🌐



Listening to football

"We follow all the European leagues carefully by listening to them on the radio. Usually we all listen together. Manuel is probably the one who listens most intently!" says Julio.

Best shaped football!



Football we can hear!



Julio, 14
Team: Grilo
Position: Winger
Favourite player: Messi
Favourite team: Barcelona



Samuel, 12
Team: Grilo
Position: Midfield & Captain
Favourite player: Messi
Favourite team: Porto



Ussai, 12
Team: N'goringor
Position: Midfield
Favourite player: Messi
Favourite team: Barcelona



Solomon, 16
Team: Grilo
Position: Goalkeeper
Favourite player: Ronaldo
Favourite team: Real Madrid & Benfica



Anna Maria, 18
Team: N'goringor
Position: Back
Favourite player: Ronaldo
Favourite team: Porto



Domingas, 14
Team: N'goringor
Position: Goalkeeper
Favourite player: Ronaldo
Favourite team: Real Madrid



Djibril, 12
Team: Grilo
Position: Forward
Favourite player: Ronaldo
Favourite team: Benficat



Manuel's rescue mis

Clouds of dust fly out behind Manuel's jeep as he drives along the bumpy roads between villages. He's on a rescue mission, defending the rights of children with disabilities. And saving their lives.

We go on a rescue mission every other month. If we could afford it, we'd do it more often because there is such great need. In many parts of our country, the lives of children with disabilities are constantly in danger. In most rural areas, these children are a long way from hospitals that know how to treat children with disabilities. Many people are poor and have never attended school, so

parents are often unable to read information about their children's conditions. Young children with disabilities are sometimes still seen as evil spirits, or snakes that should be abandoned in the forrest. That's why our rescue missions are so important. We teach villages and families about the rights of children with disabilities, and then offer the children treatment, accommodation and schooling with us," explains Manuel.



Braima – the sn

Manuel has been informed about a little boy in a distant village who needs help. When he arrives, he is met by Djenabu, a sad and worried mother who is watching her son Braima, 8, lying struggling on the ground. He is using his arms to drag his body across the yard. Although the neighbouring children are playing football just a few metres away, it's impossible for Braima to join in. His mother Djenabu explains:

"Braima has problems with his neck, and he can't stand up by himself. I don't really know what

is wrong. My husband left me when our son was a baby. He said, 'That is not my son. That is a snake slithering around.' I need someone to help me explain to my husband that he is wrong. Our son is a person, not a snake. It's hard for me to look after Braima on my own and feed us both.

I'm really worried about the future, but Manuel has promised



Not only visually impaired children

"We don't only help visually impaired children. People tell us about children with many different kinds of disabilities, both physical and mental health issues, who live in rural areas and have difficult lives. Every child has the right to a good life, and we try to always ensure each child receives the right treatment. Braima will have a full examination in hospital, and then he will have physiotherapy and training at our centre. We will also train his mother in how best to take care of Braima, and give her some goats so that she can sell their kids in order to support the family. That's not really part of what we do, but in this situation we have to help," says Manuel.

sion

16 field workers

Manuel and his organisation AGRICE have 16 field workers based all over the country. They visit towns and villages to look for blind children and children with other disabilities. Manuel works with churches, mosques, traditional leaders and local authorities. They contact AGRICE if they know of children who need help, and that's when Manuel goes on a rescue mission. Before each vis-

it, he contacts the local authorities and explains what he is going to do. AGRICE needs permission from the authorities when they take a child to Manuel's centre.



Sometimes Manuel has to complete his journey on a donkey cart. When he gets to the village there will be a meeting about children with disabilities and their right to a good life.



ake boy

Braima dreams of being able to play with the other children when they romp around.



to help me. Manuel says that if my son gets the right treatment, he will gradually be able to look after himself more. That he will be able to have a good life, and not have to struggle like this. I want that for him so much. Manuel even thinks Braima will

be able to go to school. He has promised to take my son for an examination and to get the help he needs. Braima will be able to live at Manuel's centre. That makes me so happy!"

Abdulai gets a chance

Last week, Manuel went out on a rescue mission. He visited 4-year-old Abdulai's village, and now Abdulai and his father have spent 24 hours at Manuel's centre.

"I am so grateful to Manuel for giving my son this opportunity! Abdulai will be able to learn things that would be impossible for him to learn at home in our village. Important life skills. Like how to manage everyday life when you're blind. And he'll be able to go to school! When Abdulai is finished attending Manuel's school, the plan is for him to move back home. The family and I will visit him at the centre as often as we can," explains Abdulai's father Sene, hugging his son before setting out on the long journey back to the village



Adelia was left to die



"I'll never forget the moment I held tiny newborn Adelia for the first time. She was very weak, and covered in dirt, fleas and insect bites. None of us thought she would survive. She had been left out in the forest to die just because she was blind. I was so angry I couldn't sleep for several nights. Now Adelia is nine years old and I love her," says Manuel, and tells the story of Adelia's life.

When Adelia was born and her father discovered that she was blind, he said straight away that she was not his daughter, and left the family. Adelia's young mother didn't know what to do. She left Adelia alone out in the forest, with no water or food. Adelia was naked and had no protection from snakes, dogs, rain, and the burning sun.

Some herdsmen passed the place where Adelia had been left. They saw the little body lying motionless beside the path. Adelia had shouted and struggled for as long as she could, but now she made no sound. She had nothing left to give. The herdsmen were

sure the girl was dead, when all of a sudden she made a tiny movement. They carefully picked Adelia up and ran to a nearby Catholic mission station.

Speaking out for children

The nuns contacted me and we took Adelia in. She was covered in dirt and very weak. We gave her food and drink, and took her to hospital so that she could get the right medicine. It seemed like a miracle when she came back to life.

We always speak out for the children, and try to make sure that anyone guilty of a crime against children is prosecuted. So I went to the

police and reported what had happened to Adelia, and asked them to arrest the parents. But absolutely nothing happened. At that time, the judicial system in a country ravaged by coups and civil wars was not working well. What's more, sometimes the police don't take crimes against children with disabilities seriously.

Looked everywhere

I decided to try to find the parents myself. I walked dozens of miles of paths between small villages. I was hungry, and slept where I could. After a while, everyone told me to give up, but I wanted to keep going.

I finally found Adelia's mother, who turned out to be very young. But before we got a chance to reach some sort of solution she disappeared, ashamed. Since then she has not been seen again. I have forgiven her, and I know that we can all make mistakes. But this illustrates the importance of our work raising awareness that blind children, and other children with disabilities, have the same rights as all other children.

The most important thing is that Adelia is alive, and that we can help her to have a good life. When I'm with her, I am happy. She is funny and makes great jokes. I love her!"

Manuel doesn't let anyone down

"We never send a child home unless we know he or she will be taken care of," says Manuel.

Favourite things

"My favourite things are the small pots, bowls and toy cutlery we got from Manuel for Christmas last year," says Adelia.





Two games that Adelia and the others often play together:

Correrer! = Run!
Everybody runs round and round in a circle, while the leader shouts 'Run! Run!'. Suddenly, the leader shouts a command, like: 'Sit down!' or 'Find a partner!' or 'Get in groups of four!' and so on. Each time, the children who are last are out.

Terra e Mar = Land and Sea
The children lay their shoes in a long line, which is the border between land and sea. The leader shouts 'land' or 'sea', and the students have to make sure they are on the right side of the border by jumping over the shoes or staying where they are. Whoever is last to reach the correct side, or anyone who moves to the wrong side, is out. The last one left in is the winner.

N'guende – both teacher and student

Adelia's greatest dream is to become a teacher at Manuel's school, just like N'guende, who has lived at Manuel's centre since she was 10 ...

"My mother died when I was young, so my grandmother took care of me. I became blind at the age of three. There was no school for blind children in our area, but one day when I was ten, Manuel came and talked to my grandmother. He said that he could help me. Finally, I got to start school! Now I have lived at the centre for ten years, and I help to take care of the younger children. I remember how Manuel and his wife Domingas helped me when I was little. Now I want to give the same feeling to the children who move here. I want them to feel safe and loved. That we are like a family, and I'm like their big sister.

In the mornings I am a mentor for Adelia and the other children. I teach them to read, write and

count, using a system of raised dots called braille. In the afternoons I go to school myself. Eventually I want to train to be a real teacher. My dream for the future is to become a teacher at Manuel's school. Later in life I'd like to have a family of my own, although I'll never forget my family here at the centre. Manuel and Domingas are my parents. That's how I feel in my heart."
N'guende, 20



Adelia's wardrobe

"I really like clothes. Manuel gives me all my clothes. But it's my 'big sister' N'guende who looks after our clothes and our room. This is my favourite dress," laughs Adelia.



"This is how I look when I go to school..."



... and these are my favourite shoes, because they're so comfortable!"





Adelia's day with

Right now there are 37 children living at Manuel's centre. Some of them will soon complete their education and training, and move back to their family homes. Then there are children like Adelia, for whom the centre is home. "I feel safe here, and I'm going to stay here my whole life, because this is my home," says Adelia, laughing.



05:00 Good morning!

"Every morning N'guende wakes me up. We all sleep in the same room, four children and N'guende. She's like a big sister. We are all blind. First I make my bed, then we go to the bathroom to wash and brush our teeth. Then I put on my school uniform. N'guende helps us to brush our hair," says Adelia.



06:30 Giri-Giri to Manuel's school

"N'guende makes sure we have everything we need in our schoolbags and sees us onto the school bus, which is called a 'giri-giri'. On the bus we sing together," says Adelia.



10:00 Breakfast

"I eat my breakfast, bread and juice, at school. The smell of bread is my favourite smell! At break time we play. That's the best thing about school."

Adelia's classmate, Cadi, 7, agrees: "We dance, sing and play together, the blind children and those of us who can see. It's great that we go to school together, because we are friends!"



08:00 School starts

In Adelia's class, there are blind children and children who can see.

"I love school, and I want to become a teacher at Manuel's school," says Adelia.



12:00 School finishes

"When school is finished we take the giri-giri home again," says Adelia.



Manuel



13:00 Lunch and washing up

"When we get home we change clothes and eat lunch. I wash the dishes when it's my turn on the roster."

At Manuel's centre the children learn household skills like washing dishes, cooking, cleaning and making beds, as part of their training in independent living, and so that they can help their families when they return home. Manuel's goal is for blind children to be able to live like all other children. Here Adelia, Nafi, Domingas and Djuma are washing the dishes.



13:30 Play and siesta

"After lunch I play with my friends. We are like siblings, because we live together. All my friends are beautiful and nice. I know what they look like because I have touched their faces. We play football and dance and sing. When we are finished playing, we all have a nap," explains Adelia, touching Nafi's face to find out how she looks.



17:15 Bathtime



18:00 Dinner

"We always get tasty food! My favourite food is fish with palm oil," says Adelia.



20:00 Djumbai

"Every evening we have Djumbai, and we sing and dance together. Then N'guende always tells a story, often one from the Bible," says Adelia.



21:00 Good night Adelia!

"N'guende tucks us in and says goodnight before we fall asleep. That makes us feel safe," says Adelia.

Love mango!

"Yesterday when papa Manuel came home from a trip, he brought mangoes. I love the taste of mangoes!"



Piloto is a bad dog!

"All my friends are nice, but we have a dog here too, called Piloto. He's a bad dog! He bit me once. He wanted my biscuits! That's why I think he's a bad dog. I still like stroking him though," explains Adelia.



Isabel's new life



"First I lost my parents. Then I lost the sight in both eyes. All my dreams were shattered. But Manuel gave me the chance of a better life. Now I feel like I can do whatever I want with my life!" says Isabel, 14.

She has moved from Manuel's centre to live with her aunt's family in the small town of Gabú. She became the first child with a disability to attend the mainstream school there along with all the other children in the town. That is Manuel's dream for the lives of all the children he takes care of.

"I grew up with my mother in a small village. My father died when I was a baby. My mother sold palm oil and vegetables at the market. We never had enough food, but my mother loved me so much.

My mother was ill too, and she got worse and worse. Often I did the cleaning and the laundry and went to the market to sell our produce,

because my mother wasn't well enough. Sometimes I was so afraid it made me cry. My mother was all I had.

One day when I was out playing with my friends, my worst nightmare came true. A neighbour came running to tell me that my mother was dead. I rushed home and saw that our house was full of people crying. I slipped into my mother's bed and hugged her tight. I couldn't stop crying.

Became blind

My uncles lived nearby with their families, so I was not completely alone. But they were very poor and there was never enough food for everyone. I had also fallen ill, but they didn't take care of me. I

just lay there in a corner, feeling excluded. I felt that they didn't love me.

My aunt Djenabo found out how things were, and brought me to live with her and my grandmother here in Gabú. I started school, and I had enough to eat. But I still felt poorly and I had pain all over my body. It got so bad that I couldn't walk. I was starting to get confused, so my aunt took me to hospital. One day as I was lying there, all of a sudden I couldn't see. I panicked and screamed, but there was nothing the doctors could do. I had become blind. In both eyes.

Shattered dreams

My first thought was that everything was over. There was no chance I could continue at school. I had planned to do as well as possible in school, so that I could become a doctor, teacher, or something else important. To be able to earn money and support myself and my fami-



Isabel, 14

Loves: Going to school.

Hates: Being forced to stay at home, feeling worthless.

Best thing that's happened: That Manuel helped me.

Worst thing that's happened: That I have lost so much in my life.

Looks up to: Manuel!

Wants to be: Something important.

Dream: To mean something.

ly. Now all my dreams had been shattered. How would I survive? I just cried and cried. Things had turned out every bit as bad as I had feared. I couldn't go to school. All I could do was lie at home. Even my family thought a



TEXT: ANDREAS LÖNN PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR

Going shopping

"Aua and I often go to the market together. She tells me what there is for sale, and warns me about passing cars and motorbikes. Without Aua's help I would get lost," says Isabel.

blind child was no use to anyone. For months I just lay there. Idle, alone and with no friends. My aunt and my cousin Fatinja washed me and changed my clothes. They even fed me. I felt completely worthless.

Came to Manuel

When I had been lying there like that for three months, a man came to our house and introduced himself as Manuel. He said, 'I'm blind like you. I can help you. If you come with me to Bissau you can start school again. And when you're finished your education you'll be able to apply for a good job and start working like everyone else. Look at me. I'm blind but I can do it. But you'll have to fight hard.'

I wasn't entirely convinced by what he said, but I felt I was prepared to take the chance. Manuel talked to my family too. They had never heard that blind people could go to school, read, write,

count and help out at home, and they found it hard to believe. But after meeting Manuel they realised it could be true.

First, Manuel took me to the hospital in the capital to get me the right medication,

not to be able to see but to make my body healthy. Then I moved into Manuel's centre.

Not alone

I met many more blind children at the centre. Before that I thought I was the only one

who had had a hard life. Now I was meeting lots of people with similar problems, and that helped me realise I was not alone. We played, danced and sang together. At the centre I learned to wash clothes and dishes, clean up, wash myself and take care of younger children. I learned some basic cooking skills, and how to serve others. All of a sudden, I was not this worthless person who couldn't do anything because



A new life

"The first time I met Isabel she was so depressed and felt she didn't have a life. But over time everything got much better. Now she is Isabel with a life!" laughs Manuel.

Speaking clock

"My favourite thing is this watch I got from Manuel. If you press a button, a voice tells you the time. It also tells you the time on the hour and on the half hour. I need to know the time so that I know what I should be doing, like when it's time to pray or go to school," says Isabel. Manuel also gave Isabel sunglasses and a white cane.





Isabel's name in braille.



Isabel reading the lesson in braille.

Now I've been back home for almost a year. There is a lot of love in my family and I help out with almost all the housework. I feel like a real family member, participating and doing chores. And I'm getting on well at school! I'm settled in my class and I have lots of friends. It's great to go to school with both blind children and children who can see. I think that those of us who have disabilities should be able to go to mainstream schools and live with our families. After all, we are part of society and we want to live alongside everyone else!

In the future I want to do something significant, like become a teacher. After my time with Manuel, I think I could probably achieve just about anything!"

→ I was blind. I became more like an ordinary person again. At the same time I started attending Manuel's school. I learned to read, write and count by learning braille. It felt fantastic, and I was so happy!

Home again

After a couple of months, Manuel explained that his organisation AGRICE had helped to make changes to a school in my hometown, so that blind children could attend alongside all the other students. Their work included training teachers to use braille. He also told me that he had visited my family and prepared them for me to move back home. Although I was happy at Manuel's centre, I wanted to go back to my family. I missed everyone.



A real member of the family

"When I became blind I couldn't help with any of the housework. I felt worthless, and not like a real member of the family at all. But my time at Manuel's centre changed everything. Now I help out and participate in everything the family does!" says Isabel, laughing.

Isabel's chores

Being together

"In the afternoons and evenings we often play, or sit and chat together," says Isabel, who is playing Chinese jump rope with her cousins and neighbours in this picture



Isabel's friend at Manuel's centre

"Isabel was my best friend here at the centre. We were like sisters. Manuel has helped her to move back home to her family and she is going to school there. I was sad when she moved, and I still miss her. But soon she's coming back to visit.

I came here when I was five, because the school where I lived didn't accept blind children. I didn't want to leave home then, but now I'm really happy here. I have lots of friends and I have had the

opportunity to go to school. My dream is to become a lawyer and fight for children's rights. I know that moving back home now was the right thing for Isabel to do. I believe I'm getting the best possible education here at Manuel's centre, but I know that when I finish my education he will help me to move back home too."

Domingas, 14



...my cool sunglasses...

This is my wardrobe!



90



Dressed for school...

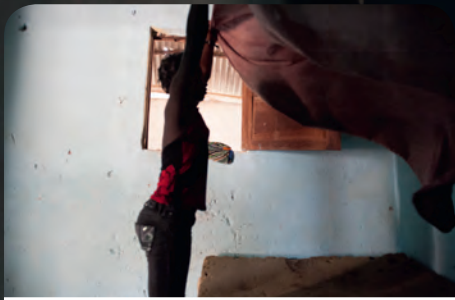
...for housework...

...in my favourite clothes...

Likes fashion

"I kind of remember what things look like. I remember that green is the colour of the leaves on the mango tree. Green is my favourite colour, but I also like pink, yellow and orange. It's important to me to be clean and look good. To wear nice clothes and have my hair styled. Just like everyone else. I'm not going to stop making an effort just because I'm

blind. I like clothes and I like fashion. It feels great when people say I look nice. Fatinja helps me to choose matching clothes, but I know what I'm doing too. For example, I might say that I want to wear my black cut-off jeans and my black and red top with my red flip-flops. Then I just hope that the clothes I want to wear are clean and ready!"



Making the beds

"I wake up at the 5 a.m. call to prayer. Then I make the beds."



Praying with grandmother

"I put on my prayer clothes, wash, and pray with my grandmother, Fatumata. I ask God for help and support in life. After that I feel good going to school."



Cooking and serving food

"I go to school satisfied almost every day, and I am grateful for that. I often help to serve food in our family. I also help prepare the meal, for example, by pounding spices. But I don't go near the fire or the pots, because I could knock something over and scald myself," says Isabel.



I bathe my little cousins...



Cleaning the house

"We clean the house at the weekend too. I sweep and mop the floors. Fatinja cleans the yard, since I easily become disorientated and don't know exactly where I am."



Fetching water

"After school I fetch water from the well and carry the bucket back home on my head."

