

## The woman of the desert and her children

**Susanne Heckmann organizes the financing of an after-school daycare center in Mauritania, where 36 girls and boys get their daily lessons - and a meal.**

By Thomas Rieke, MZ



**In the after-school daycare center "La porte de l'espoir", 36 children get loving care and something to eat every day. Also pictured: Susanne Heckmann (back row, blue scarf) and the center's founder Mame Sy (back row, left) Photos: Heckmann**

perspectives for nearly 40 girls and boys.

### Escape to warmer climes

By the time Heckmann herself found the key to this "door", she had long since developed a close relationship with Mauritania, which is a slightly longer story in itself.

When it is getting wet and cold in our latitudes, Heckmann is regularly drawn to warmer climes. But her destination is not one of the popular tourist locations and her accommodation is not an upscale hotel. She is drawn to Mauritania, one of the poorest countries in the world, 90 percent of which is desert.

For "desert" doesn't only mean heat, sand and arid landscapes for the sprightly senior who has brought up four children, studied law and most recently worked as a marriage counselor and life coach. What she associates with it are wide open spaces and quietude, clear lines and

Regensburg. Whenever Susanne Heckmann looks at the photos she brought back from her latest trip to Mauritania, she goes into raptures and her eyes light up: "This is little Mustafa. Though his hands are crippled, he has learned to hold a pen and to practice like mad. And this wonderful girl! She always banged angrily at the door because there was no more room. But she never gave up and called out: I want to learn, let me in!"

The eager Mustafa and the energetic girl are symbolic of an aid project whose success is in no small part due to the efforts of Susanne Heckmann. Since the summer of 2011, the 78-year-old from Regensburg has been organizing the financing of the after-school daycare center "La porte de l'espoir" ("The Door to Hope"), which really opened up new

enchanting shades of color far away from civilization and technology. "And the night sky is overwhelming, anyway."

This love has its origin in a concert tour with the Regensburg choir to Israel in 1991. The view of the Jordanian mountains, which are devoid of any vegetation, cast a spell over Susanne Heckmann. "I felt that this is where my soul is at home, that I'm happy there." Some years later she met Werner Bauer, a man who shares her passion. The big age difference of more than 35 years was not be an obstacle for him and "Mama Susann" to jointly set out on adventures in countries that are defined by the largest desert in the world - the Sahara.

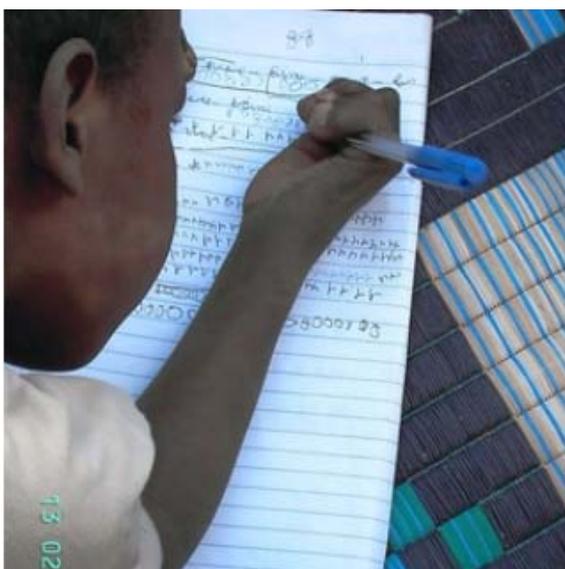
### Restrictions after attacks



Parts of the desert would have been impassable with an ordinary car. An old fire engine last served as a means transport for Susanne Heckmann and her travel companion.

In the winter of 1999, they embarked for the first time on a six week trip through Libya. Only when night-time temperatures wouldn't fall below 29 degrees did the two of them decide to escape to the sea. From 2003 on, attacks on tourists, including in Algeria, led to restrictions that spoiled the friends' fun. To do something on their own was hardly possible anymore. And so Bauer drew attention to Mauritania further to the west which, while more difficult to reach, still offered a lot of freedoms.

In 2005, the woman from Regensburg and her companion found a reliable campsite in Atar, an oasis town of 25,000 inhabitants, where they regularly drove in an out-of-service fire engine, among others. In the winter of 2010/11, Heckmann for the first time set out to Mauritania on her own to spend her nights in an African round hut. The operators of the campsite, a Dutchman and a German, long consider her as a member of the family.



Due to a genetic disease, Mustafa's hands are crippled. But he is learning to write.

One day, Heckmann was introduced to the police officer Tine and his wife Mame Sy, who was working in a mother-child center run by Spanish nuns and who toyed with the idea of establishing an after-school daycare center for neglected children. She had encountered great misery on her walks through the neighborhood, and she knew that individual donations here and there could do little to provide relief. To help permanently, an institution that continuously cares for the poorest of the poor would have to be established.

Heckmann was excited by the idea and decided to support Mame Sy. She agreed to provide 300 euros per month, which she wanted to raise from friends, acquaintances and former classmates. This allowed Mame Sy to rent a simple house. She named it "La porte de l'espoir". By July 2011, the after-school daycare center was in operation.

The success, as Heckmann could see for herself, was resounding. The children Mame Sy has taken under her wings like to come for lessons in writing and reading two hours a day, though they already have to go to school in the mornings. The meal at the end of the day is a highlight that helps motivate the children, the woman from Regensburg is sure. For many children this is the only meal they can expect on a regular basis.

In the meantime, the after-school daycare center is no longer visited by just ten to 15 children, as was planned originally, but by 36 children. When Heckmann found out, it gave her a start because she had not expected such dynamic growth. And how could the project continue to be financed under these circumstances? Today, Heckmann provides 500 euros per month, 70 euros of which are spent on the rent alone and another 50 euros on the salary for a teacher. This means that less than 50 cents per child are left for the daily meal. Mame Sy is forced to work wonders every day - or to compromise on the meals.

This fact troubles Heckmann, which is why she recently sent a newsletter to her supporters and raised the alarm: "We need more money!" Apart from the existing fixed costs, Mame Sy's commitment should finally also be honored with a modest salary. Heckmann is confident that she will find other sponsors, even if she can't refer to an official status as a non-profit organization. She likes the unusual and smooth financing method she has employed so far: the money intended for the "Door to Hope" project initially goes to the European account of the campsite operators, who can make good use of it when on home leave. In turn they guarantee to divert exactly the same amount from their local income in Mauritania for Mame Sy and her 36 hungry children.



**A big moment for the children in the after-school daycare center: dinner is served**