

Amy Maglio's nonprofit gives African girls a brighter future



Amy Maglio, founder and executive director of the Women's Global Education Project, in her Oak Park office with a photograph of the Senegalese girls who have been helped to stay in school. (Chuck Berman, Chicago Tribune)

By Nara Schoenberg

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When Amy Maglio was a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Senegal, her host sister, Khady, was her guide to village life, cheerfully explaining how to walk with a bucket of water on your head or engage in witty banter regarding overconsumption of millet.

"She had a spark," Maglio says of Khady, who was about 9 when they first met.

"She was very bright and enthusiastic and wanted to read — like most kids, they're curious. Any exposure she got to anything I was doing she would try very hard to understand."

Khady, who cared for her six younger brothers and sisters, had never been to school and was technically too old to begin. But before leaving Senegal, Maglio found a private boarding school that would take her and paid the \$250 tuition. When Maglio returned for a visit several years later, her host sister was ready for her.

"She took me aside, she showed me how she could read and write, and she was just so proud of the fact that she could do that," Maglio says. "It really changed her world."

Maglio went on to work in international development, both as a consultant and at a nonprofit, but 10 years ago when she was pregnant with her first child, she remembered her experience with Khady. By that point, she had seen many well-intentioned projects that failed in the real world, and few that had worked as well as sending her host sister to school. Working at her dining room table, Maglio started the nonprofit Women's Global Education Project (womensglobal.org), which now has an annual budget of \$480,000 and provides scholarship assistance to 730 African girls.

The Women's Global Education Project reaches 8,000 people a year in 65 villages in Senegal and Kenya with a range of education-related initiatives, including the scholarships, health workshops, parent meetings, and boys and girls clubs.

"I think education is empowering," says Maglio, 44, who lives with her husband and children in Oak Park. "How do you know anything other than your immediate surroundings if you don't read a book? How can you ever improve your situation if you don't know about other things that are going on in the world?"

The following is an edited transcript.

Q: How do you convince families to let their daughters go to school?

A: I don't. I partner with local community organizations, so I've already found people on the ground who live and work in that community, who find this issue is something they want to work on, who are real leaders in their communities. I've been very successful in finding at least two of them now. One of the main reasons this is so successful is finding those people. So it's not me convincing anyone to send (their) daughter to school.

Q: There's a community member who does that.

A: Right, and they came to this issue before I found them, at a very, very grass-roots level. So what we do is we work with them to figure out why girls aren't going to school in this particular community and what kinds of things can we do about that.

Q: What are some of the reasons?

A: One of the reasons is just lack of funds. If there are limited resources in the family, girls aren't going to school. Books, school fees, transportation to school — sometimes that's just too much and they're not going. We found that there's bias in favor of boys. If there are limited resources in the family, the money is first going to boys and then whatever is left over goes to the girls. And in some cases, it's even traditional for girls to be a maid or get some kind of income to send their brothers to school.

We (also) found that it has to do with health issues. It has to do with menstruation. Traditionally they don't have sanitary napkins, they use rags, but they can't really wash out their rags at school, so they stay home for those days of the month.

The single most important thing we learned is (that) it's not just about one thing. We wish it was about just the school fees. We wish it was just about not having enough teachers. But it's not. It's so many things that are pressures on them to drop out at every age, so we do scholarships, we do health education workshops for scholars and their families, we do community engagement around the importance of girls and girls' education. We do this alternative rite of passage program in Kenya to help (mothers) eliminate (female genital

mutilation).

Q: What's included in a scholarship?

A: It depends; it's very based on what your needs are. If you're in elementary school and you're in Kenya, a scholarship might look like a uniform, some shoes and sanitary napkins. But if you're a secondary school scholar in Senegal, you might be getting housing close to school, room and board, transportation back to your village for the holidays, toiletry bags every month with sanitary napkins, toothpaste and a bar of soap. You get after-school tutoring, you get health education, in some cases, you get counseling.

Q: Tell me what you do when you're not working and not parenting and not sleeping.

A: That's a tough one. I do yoga, that's my salvation. At 10:30 Saturday morning you will find me at yoga, no matter what's happening. It's my time to relax. I can breathe. I can focus on myself. People are like, "There's a parent-kid yoga class" — no. Yoga to me is by myself. I am walking out the door at 10:15 on Saturday morning no matter what's happening.

Q: Do you find it helpful to carve out a certain time?

A: Necessary. If I don't carve it out there's never the time. I think, "Oh, I'll hit another class midweek." No. In eight years, it hasn't happened.

Q: And you cook?

A: I like cooking. I'm kind of obsessed with making pizza. Making the perfect pizza crust, that's important to me. So if I ever have time on a weekend, I'll start making pizza dough and experimenting with the different flour, to make it just that perfect consistency of chewy and crunchy.

Q: Is that relaxing, or more energizing?

A: It's relaxing (but) there's a little pressure there. I think I need a little pressure. And then, also, I have dinner parties or invite people over to give me that extra pressure of that time frame when everyone's showing up.

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