

# **GREETINGS FROM GRAVE: `WE ARE ALL DOING WELL'**

## **Series: THE MIRACLE MERCHANTS. Special report. First of two parts.: [CHICAGOLAND FINAL Edition]**

Save the children. Years after a boy's death, an American family still received messages from Abdoul Kone, the child whom they had sponsored. Their case shows how donors can be betrayed by the sponsorship system.

"Hello!" began the New Year's message forwarded by Save the Children Federation Inc., the agency through which the Dixons had been sponsoring Abdoul since 1990. "I was very happy to receive your card along with a nice picture! We think of you day and night. We are all doing well, and happy to meet yours. We pray for them. Happy New Year 1996 to all of you. May God bless you. Now it is very cold here."

The Dixons had no idea they were reading a message from the grave. Abdoul Kone, in whose name Clover Dixon was sending Save the Children \$20 a month, had died nearly three years before, the victim of a donkey cart accident.

Save the children. Years after a boy's death, an American family still received messages from Abdoul Kone, the child whom they had sponsored. Their case shows how donors can be betrayed by the sponsorship system.

As they had been in previous years, Clover and John Dixon were delighted to receive a 1996 New Year's greeting from this West African village.

For nearly six years, a boy from Mali named Abdoul Kone had occupied a special place in their Bellingham, Wash., family, his photograph posted on the refrigerator door and his letters handled with loving care.

"Hello!" began the New Year's message forwarded by Save the Children Federation Inc., the agency through which the Dixons had been sponsoring Abdoul since 1990. "I was very happy to receive your card along with a nice picture! We think of you day and night. We are all doing well, and happy to meet yours. We pray for them. Happy New Year 1996 to all of you. May God bless you. Now it is very cold here."

The Dixons had no idea they were reading a message from the grave. Abdoul Kone, in

whose name Clover Dixon was sending Save the Children \$20 a month, had died nearly three years before, the victim of a donkey cart accident.

"We're not rich people," said Clover Dixon, 42, whose husband is a plumber, and who decided to sponsor a child after seeing a television commercial. "The \$20 we sent them is \$20 we would put in our own refrigerator."

The Dixons' troubling experience illustrates the logistical and procedural obstacles that child sponsorship agencies can encounter. Save the Children couldn't monitor the children closely enough to ensure that the Dixons were sponsoring a living child, let alone that the child was receiving benefits. And the letters from children to their sponsors--a strictly enforced SCF requirement--can be compromised by fabrication.

Villagers and relatives in Dialanikoro still remember the day Abdoul, collecting firewood, was driving one of the small donkey carts commonly used to ferry loads in Malian villages. Something startled the donkey, the villagers said. It bolted and the cart tipped over, fatally crushing the 8-year-old boy against a mango tree.

Official records rarely are kept in rural Mali. For most of those who live in this Muslim village, time is a matter of seasons, cycles and festivals, rather than the progression of days on a calendar.

When a Tribune reporter visited in 1997, Abdoul's mother, Kadiatou Ballo, now divorced and living in the nearby village of Massala, recalled that her son had died at least three years earlier, "but I think it's even longer than that."

But Moussa Kone, who is not related to Abdoul, clearly remembered that the boy had died in the spring of 1993. "It was the year we built that mosque," said Kone, who heads the village council and the community's water project.

Taking a break from overseeing his peanut-shelling operation, he gestured toward a yellow concrete building behind him. The date painted in white over the red iron door: 18-6-93, or June 18, 1993.

"This is the date it was (completed)," Kone said. "Abdoul died the day we started mixing cement. The message came to go to the funeral."

Kone recalled reporting Abdoul's death to Djibril Doumbia, a Save the Children agent in charge of photographing and tracking children in a number of villages, including Dialanikoro. After learning from the Tribune about the timing and circumstances of Abdoul's death, SCF investigators confirmed that the child died in 1993. The agency reprimanded Doumbia for failing to report the death promptly.

Doumbia first claimed it was "impossible" for him not to know of a death in one of his villages, where he is familiar with "90 percent" of the sponsored youths. But Doumbia said he didn't recall Abdoul Kone or having heard of his death.

"Even if I had this information, I no longer remember," he said. "There are many children to care for. Death is common."

It was Doumbia's job to contact each sponsored child's family at least once a year and to write an annual status report for each child's sponsor.

Although Clover Dixon never received such a report, she continued to correspond faithfully with Abdoul.

Abdoul's uncle, Souleymane Kone, produced four greeting cards from the Dixons, who had sent annual Christmas greetings. SCF employees, apparently unaware Abdoul was dead, delivered the cards.

Jeff Ramin, Save the Children's Mali field office director, said his staff learned from field workers about Abdoul's death in late 1996 and informed the Dixons in a letter dated Feb. 19, 1997. The letter did not tell the family when or how Abdoul died, much less that he had been dead nearly four years.

The condolence letter implied that Abdoul had fallen victim to one of the childhood diseases SCF says it is working to prevent.

"Tragic events such as this confirm that we can only redouble our efforts to help more children live long and healthy lives," the letter said. "With Save the Children's help a major child survival program is being introduced into the Kolondieba area to support the primary health activities already underway."

At the time the letter was written, SCF officials themselves did not know the date or cause of Abdoul's death.

Upon learning from the Tribune that Abdoul had died in 1993, Clover Dixon retrieved her collection of letters from the boy. Among them is a New Year's greeting from 1995, signed "Abdoul Karim Kone and parents."

"I go with my father to the field to pick up the cotton stems," the letter said. "I go into my father's garden every afternoon. I often stay home to take care of the children and do light work. I am very healthy as all my family is. I send you my best wishes for the year 1995."

Dixon feels betrayed by the sponsorship organization, which she says repaid her trust with bogus letters from a dead child.

"If I'm going to cherish these letters, I'd like to know that the child actually wrote them," Dixon said. "It's kind of hurtful to find out someone I was sending Christmas cards to was not alive."

Nor has the knowledge that their hard-earned money was used to help dig wells or to inoculate other children against measles dimmed the Dixons' grief at learning that the child they envisioned happily working in his father's garden was actually resting in a shallow grave.

"What exactly are these people doing if they don't know that the children are dying?" Dixon asked.

"I've had some questions about their administration. I originally asked to sponsor a girl and I got a boy. At one point, after Abdoul died, my statements started coming in Spanish.

"But I always thought that what they did in the field made up for it, as long as they were on top of the kids."

When Save the Children learned the Dixons had received letters purportedly written by a dead child, it termed the situation "an intolerable breach of sponsor trust." SCF says Balla Sara Sissoko, a low-level employee who wrote the letters, has been reprimanded.

Meanwhile, SCF field directors around the world have been ordered to review their letter-writing policies to make sure, in the words of one official, "this is not happening elsewhere. Or, if it is, to put a stop to it."

Clover Dixon declined SCF's offer to refund the money she had sent on Abdoul's behalf, agreeing instead to assume the sponsorship of another child in Dialanikoro, Arouna Dibate, whom SCF described as "eager to participate in the sponsorship program."

Dixon recently received a photo of Arouna, along with an expedited progress report.

Said Dixon: "This is more data than I had on Abdoul the whole time we had him."

-----

About this special report

Between 1992 and 1996, Americans donated more than \$850 million to four of the largest and best-known child sponsorship organizations: Save the Children, the Christian Children's Fund, Children International and Childreach. That money was sent on faith that it would reach an African village, a Pacific island or a Latin American slum and, in the language of the Christian Children's Fund, "work a miracle" in the life of the little girl or boy whose photographs and letters are the sponsor's only evidence of the child's existence. To determine whether such faith is warranted, in 1995 Tribune reporters and editors began sponsoring these 12 children through four organizations without any mention of their Tribune affiliation. Last May, with no assistance from the four sponsorship organizations, Tribune reporters set out to learn how the lives of the sponsored children had been affected. Part One of this special report recounts what the Tribune learned about two of those organizations, Save the Children and Childreach. Part Two, which appears next week, examines Children International and the Christian Children's Fund.

**Illustration**

PHOTOS 2; Caption: PHOTOS (color): Souleymane Kone discusses the death in 1993 of his nephew, Abdoul Kone (photo at left. Save the Children photo.) Souleymane Kone said Save the Children staffers, apparently unaware Abdoul was dead, delivered greeting cards sent by an American family who sponsored the child. Photography by Jose More.

Copyright Chicago Tribune Co. Mar 15, 1998