

# Rhilpot family preparing for prolonged stay in Africa

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Niger is situated between the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic, with more than 80 per cent of the country a sandy wasteland. The people live on a strip of scrub land not far from the equator where it is "hot, hot, hot," said Mr. Philpot.

## Most are poor farmers

There are few natural resources and most people live as subsistence farmers. Medical care is so scarce that often people come to Galmi from neighbouring countries such as Nigeria and Chad.

"Practising medicine there is a whole different world," said Mrs. Philpot who is currently working in Dr. Jan Boxall's office. "It's really mind-boggling. People come in with tumours and things that have never been treated."

She has a collection of clinical pictures detailing some of the conditions she has come face to face with, including one youngster with an eye tumor the size of an adult's fist. In Niger there is little chance to consult with other doctors on difficult cases, she said, as the whole hospital only had half a dozen doctors on staff.

Both Philpots were drawn to the missionary life and took trips overseas before they met. Mr. Philpot spent some time in Haiti and Jamaica, while his wife was able to do a malaria research project in west Africa and a medical school placement in Kenya.

"The whole idea of working overseas evolved during this period," said Mr. Philpot. "Despite the suffering and the poverty there is an immense satisfaction in life there."

The Philpots said they have come to see that people in Canada are among the most privileged in the world and live at a level higher than 99 per cent of the rest of humanity.

"Life is so different there that in describing it, people here don't have a peg to hang it on," Mrs. Philpot said. "You get an exposure to how the rest of the world lives."

## Don't point, except by nose

The Philpots said despite some political troubles in Niger they want to return and put to use some of the local knowledge they've gained. They are reasonably familiar with the language and customs. For example, you would never take anything with your left hand in Niger because the left hand is used for "dirty things" Mrs. Philpot said. Accepting something in your left hand would be an insult. In addition you do not point to people or things to identify them. Pointing is a method of cursing.

"When you want to indicate something in Niger you gesture with your nose," said Mrs. Philpot. "When you're talking to someone you feel like a chicken. It's funny, actually."

Democracy came to Niger in the early 1990s but high expectations that life would soon turn prosperous were unwarranted, and strikes and unrest predominated. Compounding a lack of natural resources is an "appalling" school system. Niger has literacy rates under 25 per cent for women.

"People equated democracy with western style affluence," said Mr. Philpot. "People who had been thankful for any opportunity in the past now wanted more. Strikes became more threatening. When we returned to Canada in the fall of 1994, we were burned out."

The Philpots said they were happy to spend the last few years in Canada, to put down some roots in their home country and give their children a chance to learn about their own culture and to foster ties to their homeland.

"Being in Niger is a tremendous education to them but we want them to have some of their home culture so they will be at home in their own country," said Mr. Philpot. "We encourage letter writing and we will take a computer with us so the kids can become computer literate. Their grandparents send them videos so they will have common Canadian cultural things to latch on to."

## Kids know snakes and scorpions

Streetwise for a child in Niger is knowing enough to avoid snakes and scorpions, according to Mr. Philpot.

"In Niger we have a comfortable lifestyle but not luxurious. It's much simpler there," he said. "It's like cottage living. It's generally a wonderful environment for kids. We lived in a cement block

house and we had cold running water and somewhat reliable electricity."

"Sure there's a culture shock," added Mrs. Philpot. "People accept sickness and death more readily than we do."

Mr. Philpot said western supplies were available but were far too expensive to use on a regular basis. "You learn to do without things and appreciate luxuries. You feel an injustice with the dispersion of wealth in the world. It's difficult listening to people in Canada complaining about how hard done by they are. There are billions of people who would give anything to be as well taken care of."

The Philpots say their children have adjusted well to moving back to Canada and have exhibited a sense of loss for both worlds in which they live.

"They were upset at leaving their friends in Niger and upset

about leaving Canada for the same reasons," Mr. Philpot said. "However, to young children home is where mom and dad are."

The couple's extended family has mixed feelings about their work. "They are very supportive of the work but they would rather someone else did it," said Mrs. Philpot, daughter of a minister. "I've enjoyed my work here at the office in Milton but we know we wouldn't be happy staying in Canada. We feel a very strong tug from God to get out there and help."

Mr. Philpot agreed. "We could stay in Canada and be safe and comfortable but at the end of our lives would we be satisfied? We want to help with their health needs and show Christianity as our motivating factor for being there," he said.

No matter where the Philpots go, part of their hearts will always be in Africa. In March 1991 one of their daughters died, a victim of meningitis.

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