



The Atkins Family

Ministering in Guinea-Bissau
www.jasonandemilyatkins.com
jasonpatkins@gmail.com
emilymarieatkins@gmail.com

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A Donkey Cart by Emily

There are lots of projects that are starting to seem normal to us - welding up shelves and doors, and even putting roofs on buildings. But this past month Jason has been working on a project that he never would've imagined doing - designing and building a donkey-drawn cart to transport a small tractor back and forth to rice and peanut fields.

We spent the month of June out in the village of Gabu helping missionary friends of ours get a small hand-operated tractor up and running so they could expand their agricultural training ministry. The tractor has been a huge blessing to their work, but the missionaries themselves are going to be out of the country for awhile and are selling their truck. The Guineans who are going to keep farming will need a good way to get the tractor back and forth to the fields each day. Since donkeys are plentiful in that region (and easy to rent for the day), they decided to build a donkey cart that the tractor could easily be loaded onto and transported back and forth.

Jason loves designing and figuring out new things, so it has been a fun project for him. We hope that the cart will help the farming project for many years to come.

When Helping is Hard by Emily

In the month leading up to Christmas, during naptime and after bed, I sat at my sewing machine, hemming, snipping, and praying for my neighbors. I was making Christmas presents - little wallets out of bright African fabric. Useful, non-extravagant presents made with love, with my own two hands. The majority of our neighbors are not Christians, and I wanted to tell them about the wonderful present that God gave to us many Christmases ago.

On Christmas morning, I stepped outside of our house and said Merry Christmas to my neighbor who was sweeping her porch. She stood up and without even saying good morning demanded rudely that I give her juice and throw her a party to celebrate. As I greeted a few more neighbors that I don't know very well the same thing happened. People who normally greet me with a smile, stood in front of me scowling and demanding that I throw them a Christmas party. Feeling deflated, I tucked my wallets deep in my bag and went back home.

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Shortening the axle from a broken-down minivan to use in the donkey cart



Cutting apart a scrapyard chassis to make the frame for the donkey cart



An American, a Mexican, and a Brazilian working together to design the donkey cart

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I wish I could say that this was an isolated incident, but it's not. The other day Savannah took her sidewalk chalk outside to share with a group of kids and there were several there that she hadn't played with before. As soon as she opened her bag the kids started grabbing and shoving and yelling, pulling up chalk by the handfuls and boasting about how much they got from the white kid.

You see, for centuries here "rich" Westerners have come with hands full, dumping it all in the laps of whoever was first or loudest or poorest, and then left, never following up to see if the things they did made a difference in the long run, and hardly ever working together with the people affected to see if they had better ideas. This pattern has led to a sense of entitlement, as many people simply wait for others to solve their problems. We see this on a personal level with our neighbors, on an institutional level with police and government officials asking for bribes to feed their families since the government hasn't paid their salaries in months, and even at the highest level as more than half of the official government operating budget is foreign aid money.

Fortunately, not all of the stories have a sad ending. In the case of the chalk, I was standing right there and quickly put a stop to the chaos. I told the children that Savannah was not a vending machine. She had come to play with them and she had brought the chalk to share. If they were looking for a hand out, fine, take the chalk and go home, but if they wanted to make friends with a kid who wanted to be friends with them, then they should treat her like a friend. The kids gave back the chalk; each took a piece and all started drawing and chattering away. Savannah made several new friends that day. Some days she brings toys out and shares with them, and some days they bring toys out and share with her.

Even my wallets had a happy ending. A few weeks after Christmas I did what I was planning to do in the first place. I visited some of my neighbors who I've developed relationships with. We sat down and chatted about our kids and I told them that I had been praying for them. I gave them the wallets and said that when they used them they should remember the gift of Jesus that God gave to us.

The wallets and the chalk are just small examples of what we're trying to do - build relationships with people so that when we do share or give things they are part of a friendship.

Help that really helps is almost never a handout. Help that really helps is a partnership: coming alongside a family or a business or a church; encouraging them to recognize their unique talents, resources, and challenges; mapping out a plan, providing training and accountability; helping to bring destructive thought patterns to the surface, and establish productive ones that work in their culture or situation. It's not a three-step process and it doesn't happen overnight. It takes everything we have to give and then some, but after years of investment, seeing the fruit of faithfulness - well, that's why we're here.

Would you please pray for us. Walking this tightrope, balancing our best intentions and the real life consequences is not easy. We believe in what we're doing - partnering with a vocational school to provide job training, building machines for missionaries who are teaching better farming practices, working together with churches to build schools, and helping a drinking water filter factory get started - and because we believe in it, we want to do it right. As we look forward to a new year, we want to glorify God by encouraging His people and providing help that really helps.

Jason + Emily



Jason posing as the donkey with the tractor sitting on top of the cart's frame behind him



Even though the shop in Canchungo is twice the size it's still packed full of equipment!



My good friend and neighbor Binta, braiding her granddaughter Aminata's hair



Nathaniel saw some friends of mine cooking on the ground outside and ran over to sit with them.



Jason teaching some teens from our church how to play Quirkle at the New Year's party



Savannah and the kids at church were running around outside together and cracking each other up.