

## L'école des Enfants

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Surrounded by lush planted fields, a gentle river, palm trees, banana trees, and mango trees, L'Ecole Des Enfants, a Waldorf inspired kindergarten, opened its doors on September 10, 2018. The school is located on the outskirts of Bouaké, a city in the center of the Ivory Coast, a country that is still reeling from the scars of recent civil war, but whose inhabitants have rallied to restore this city and this country to a vibrant and welcoming place.

Local residents have partnered with Swedish entrepreneur Maria Johansson in order to open this Waldorf-inspired preschool. After 2 years of preparation, which included the purchasing of land, building a classroom, partnering with a local village in order to enroll needy students, hiring and training two teachers and a chef, sending the two teachers to Kenya for teacher training, and bringing in a Waldorf Teacher trainer for a month-long on-site seminar, the school has gotten off to a strong start.

It's been a collaborative effort. Maria Johansson and her Ivory Coast team worked with the local institutions and neighborhood organizations from the very beginning, educating the community about the tenets of Waldorf Education, meeting with the local village chiefs in order to encourage participation and understanding, hiring builders to create a beautiful and unusual hexagon-shaped kindergarten classroom, and coming together to support this pioneering project.



This is the first Waldorf initiative in the Ivory Coast, and Waldorf education does not yet have a strong foothold in West Africa. However, the recent history in the Ivory Coast of civil war, violence, and unrest, underscores the need for a healing education. The inhabitants of Bouaké have gathered around this opportunity with warmth, love, and good will. Although the children enrolled in the school, and their parents, are deeply challenged by poverty, the joy they bring to the school and to all their daily activities is palpable.

Patience has been needed to navigate some of the early challenges and obstacles. These included challenges with the land purchase and difficulties finishing construction on the classroom: it actually wasn't quite ready for the first day of school. But school began joyfully anyway, first in a rented hotel room, and later in a rented tent. After two weeks of improvisation, the teachers and students were finally able to enter their finished classroom building. For each and every challenge, the community has risen to the occasion and demonstrated their commitment. And for the inaugural day festivities, the school community celebrated along with acclaimed musician Abou Nidal as well as the mayor of Bouaké.



Eleven students from a local village have enrolled in the school. The school provides a Waldorf inspired education to these needy students, and two healthy and nutritious meals: a snack and a hot lunch. The current students are on scholarship, with funding provided by private donations and foundations. The business model of the school also allows for students to enroll who are able to pay, with the hope that the mix will help offset operating and tuition expenses.

In every way, the joy of Waldorf education is apparent at this school. The teachers have lovingly tended to the space of the kindergarten room, decorating it with branches and craft items, and have developed daily rhythm which brings locally inspired songs, stories, work, and play to the children. The teachers also celebrate the cycles of nature, through daily nature walks, swims in the nearby river, outdoor playtime, and seasonal festivities, marking the local agricultural seasons.

Currently the school is looking towards digging a well and building latrines. In addition, the school plans to expand and grow the school year by year, with this first class of eleven students leading the way. This initiative has already demonstrated considerable perseverance in the face of many obstacles, and this perseverance is rewarded each and every moment by the shining joyful faces of the students and their dedicated teachers.

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A Steiner/Waldorf trained educator and writer, Shannon Honigblum is the author of Making a Family Home (Steiner Books) and editor of Waldorf Early Childhood Education: An Introductory Reader (WECAN). She lives in Austin/Texas, USA.

