

WAYFARING DANGER

Jill Battson | For The New Mexican



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Fishermen on the coast of Senegal, where thousands of migrants make risky ocean voyages every year in search of work

Right, Todd Lester (left) and Stefan Barbic of freeDimensional, an organization building alliances between artists and social-justice activists



In January 2007, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued 14 Senegalese men from a dilapidated catamaran in the wintry sea about 800 miles east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The men, all between the ages of 23 and 43, were destined for the United States and had spent 47 days at sea with little food and water, equipped only with a global-positioning system.

The men started their journey in the small island of Gorée, one of 19 *communes d'arrondissement* (semiautonomous wards) of the city of Dakar in Senegal — the westernmost point of Africa. Senegalese workers used to travel to the Canary Islands to pick grapes in the Spanish vineyards, but with Spain clamping down on illegal immigrants, human-rights advocates fear that more job-hunting Africans will pay hundreds of dollars to undertake trips of greater magnitude and risk in boats that are barely seaworthy.

To people in dire economic circumstances, even a 50-50 chance of surviving an ocean voyage and finding work seems better than the odds of surviving at home, according to Todd Lester, executive director of freeDimensional, a three-year-old organization that fosters international collaborations between artists and social-justice activists. Desperate people tend to commodify their lives, he said. “They do understand that there’s a 50-50 chance; 50 per cent is that they get to the place and get a better job — that’s the payoff; the other 50 per cent is that they drown at sea.

“The Senegalese have a tradition of their young men traveling, finding work, sending money home, and ultimately coming back — a sort of a rite of passage — so, culturally, they are disposed to such wayfaring,” Lester said. But a further impetus to the outmigration is the loss of traditional jobs, such as fishing. A Fisheries Partnership Agreement between Senegal and the European Union allows foreign fleets to heavily fish Senegal’s coastal waters, thus reducing opportunities for Senegalese fishermen.

The Associated Press has estimated that 30,000 Africans migrated to the Canary Islands in 2006, and it is believed that thousands of people who attempt these hazardous sea journeys perish from dehydration, starvation, or drowning.

To raise awareness of the plight of Senegalese migrants, Lester and freeDimensional’s managing director, Stefan Barbic, speak about the problem at Santa Fe Art Institute on Monday, April 21. The two arrive in Santa Fe fresh from a conference with New York’s Senegalese community, which they hope will produce a unified message about the Senegalese migrants detained last year (10 were deported after petitioning for political asylum, one received political asylum, and “three are still in the warehouse,” according to Lester). FreeDimensional’s participation in that meeting forms the basis of a three-day workshop that Lester and Barbic lead at SFAI, beginning Tuesday, April 22.

The workshop is part of Santa Fe Art Institute’s OUTSIDER: Tourism, Migration, and Exile series. The institute is one of many arts centers around the world that make up the Alliance of Artists Communities. SFAI offers work and living spaces to artists displaced