



# Friends of Sierra Leone Newsletter December 2013

## Holding a Stranger Fine

By Peggy Murrah, Friends of Sierra Leone President

In September, I was invited to attend the Amistad Committee, Incorporated, 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary events in New Haven, Connecticut. This organization has done some very admirable work since it began in 1988 to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Amistad Revolt in 1839. For more information regarding the organization and its past accomplishments, see <http://www.amistadcommitteeinc.org>. The original Amistad Committee formed in 1839 to help the Amistad captives win their freedom and return home.

The event in September had several activities that included a program at the statue of Sengbe Pieh at City Hall. In addition to entertainment by a drum group, there was a soloist singing the national anthems of both

Sierra Leone and the United States, a youth choir from the local school system, and a poetry reading. Representatives of the Amistad Committee, the New Haven government, and the government of Sierra Leone all spoke to the audience.

Following the program, the group moved to the Grove Street Cemetery to participate in a memorial service for six Amistad captives who died in the United States. In addition to speeches, a traditional libation was poured and representatives from Sierra Leone laid a wreath at the memorial. An invited group then went to lunch and enjoyed the food and company at the Yale Club.

The day concluded with a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Celebration Banquet at Amarante's Sea Cliff on Long Island

Sound, The setting sun provided the perfect backdrop to a lovely location. The speeches, entertainment, food and company were enjoyed by all. The entire day was excellent.

While the activities were much appreciated, they are not the reason the day will stay in my memory. My invitation had come from the Amistad Committee and not from the government of Sierra Leone, who were also invited guests. During the morning program at City Hall, Ambassador Stevens was seated with the honored guests above the audience. At one point, as he was looking at the audience, he saw me and got out of his seat to come down and greet me. Shortly after, one of his staff came to where I was and insisted that I come join the Sierra Leonean contingency as part of their group. I was stunned as I took my seat behind His Excellency, Amb. Stevens. When I was a Peace Corps Volunteer and when I return to Sierra Leone as a visitor now, I was and am always humbled by the gracious treatment of not only my Sierra Leonean family and friends, but strangers I have not met in the past. I know this to be the Sierra Leonean tradition of "holding a stranger fine." I have tried to incorporate it into my life in the States because it is just so touching. However, I never expected to have the people of Sierra Leone "hold a stranger fine" in my own country, but that is exactly what happened. The Embassy staff invited me to ride with them to the cemetery for the memorial service. Afterward, they included me in the special lunch and then took me back to where my car was. That evening, I was seated next to the high table as a sign of respect for

Friends of Sierra Leone.

I returned to my hotel room and reflected on the day and my experiences. I realized then that the reason so many of us remain connected to Sierra Leone and her wonderful citizens is because we have a huge debt we are still trying to repay. When we were volunteers, they accepted us without hesitation. They fed us, clothed us and tried to keep our days full as part of their communities, families and lives. They made us feel not only welcome and wanted, but part of their lives in a way that I have never experienced in any other country — including my own. Many of us learned the value of other people just because they are and not because they are famous, rich, or known for any reason. We learned that it is very rude to pass another human and not acknowledge the person with a polite greeting. We learned that you do not go to a shop and begin your exchange with "give me...." We learned that the people with the lowest unskilled jobs are just as deserving of respect as a headmaster. We learned the joys and stability of living in a compound with people not related to us. We learned to offer our best to guests. And, we learned of our own importance as human beings — not because we were educated, not because we were from the United States — but because we are human beings. That is enough to deserve the respect of our fellow human beings. I don't believe I will ever repay the huge debt I owe Sierra Leoneans, but I know that it is not a debt that they are counting. Thank you to my Sierra Leonean friends. I still have much to learn.

## Planning the 2014 Annual Meeting

In 2004, Friends of Sierra Leone had its annual meeting in Freetown for the first time ever. It was a hugely successful event, well attended and generally lots of fun. When it was time to plan for the 2005 annual meeting, it was hard to figure out what could possibly follow the 2004 meeting. Luckily for attendees, Sapelo Island, Georgia was selected. The 2014 annual meeting will be held there too. Mark your calendar for July 28<sup>th</sup> through July 31<sup>st</sup>. You won't want to miss the opportunity to visit such a beautiful, isolated spot and participate in the annual meeting at the same time.

Sapelo is a barrier island on Georgia's Colonial Coast. It is state-owned except for a small community called Hog Hammock, which is owned by descendants of the original Africans brought to the island to work in the 1800s. The only way to reach the island is by a daily ferry or private boat. No cars may be brought from the mainland. The closest commercial airport is in Jacksonville, Florida and about 80 miles from the ferry landing at Darien, Georgia.

Friends of Sierra Leone will once again book the Reynolds Plantation for the meeting. A minimum of 16 and maximum of 29 people may book the Plantation. The cost is \$160 per day, but that includes 3 meals as well. Those who attended the 2005 meeting will be happy to share their

thoughts about the Plantation, but I think all will agree that it was a perfect location for the meeting. While everyone is in the same house, it is so large and spread out that privacy is not sacrificed. The plantation was built by R.J. Reynolds of tobacco fame. It is a very unusual house with a "circus" room, a bowling lane in the basement, an indoor swimming pool with Grecian statues, and beautiful grounds complete with Spanish moss covered oak trees.

There are campsites available on the island as well as private lodging via Hog Hammock residents. Some of these cost much less, but meals are not included. Friends of Sierra Leone can't give any opinion of other lodgings since our only experience is at the plantation. Author Cornelia Bailey offers lodging options in Hog Hammock. You may enjoy reading her book, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man*, before going. This is her memoir of growing up on Sapelo Island and is heavily influenced by her family's relatively close connection to their African ancestors.

While it is a bit soon to have an agenda, in 2005 activities included a visit with author Cornelia Bailey. We traveled to the mainland to spend an afternoon barbeque with Wilson Moran, whose family is featured in the documentary *The Language You Cry In;* entertainment by the McIntosh Stompers; a visit with the lovely

Mary Moran and a tour of Harris Neck, which is now a bird sanctuary but had been home to the descendants of slaves from, among other places, Sierra Leone.

Because this meeting requires that we commit to a minimum of participants and we have to submit a list of passengers about a month ahead of time to the ferry, we will have deadlines for registration that we must adhere to. This is a wonderful opportunity to visit a beautiful island, stay in a mansion that is absolutely lovely, explore a lighthouse, and enjoy a huge, private beach in addition to the meeting activities. In the event that more than

twenty-nine people want to sign up and stay in the mansion, the first twenty-nine will be accommodated.

Please check the website, [www.fosalone.org](http://www.fosalone.org), periodically for information regarding registration and payment details. We will also share this information on the Friends of Sierra Leone member listserv. Anyone wishing to go ahead and commit before the registration is available should contact Peggy Murrah at [info@fosalone.org](mailto:info@fosalone.org). Remember, there is limited space available so reserve your place soon!



## An Appeal from the President

It is the time of year when people share with others — particularly with those in need. Please remember that Friends of Sierra Leone continues to provide small grants for projects in Sierra Leone and is dependent upon members' generosity to do so. In addition to our twice yearly funding available to organizations working in Sierra Leone, we also have a fund that is open to current Peace Corps Volunteers serving there. We honor the memory of Daphne Sawyerr-Dunn by continuing a scholarship program in her name for selected students at the School for the Blind in Bo. In order to keep these funding opportunities available, we encourage you to donate to the general project fund, the Peace Corps fund, or the scholarship. Your donation is tax deductible, and if you donate in honor of someone else, we will be happy to send the honoree a note telling him or her of your gift. The same goes for a gift in memory of someone. We will send the family a note to let them know.

Friends of Sierra Leone continues to be one of the few organizations that applies 100% of your donations toward projects. We have no paid staff. Our administrative expenses, while relatively small, are covered by membership fees. You can donate to Friends of Sierra Leone knowing that your entire donation is being used to help the people of Sierra Leone and not someone in the USA. Be generous!

## Country Update

From Daryn Warner, Acting Peace Corps Country Director

Peace Corps/Sierra Leone just submitted our 2013 status reports to HQ. It's been a challenging year. However, as with all worthwhile work, the challenges only highlight how important the successes are. We're pleased to share a sneak peek, if you will, of our upcoming annual stakeholders' briefing.

Academic success is not a reality for all students for myriad reasons that Peace Corps alone cannot address. So, in the 2012/13 academic year we reframed our focus to highlight "education for life." While we will assist students in making the grade, our measures of success for Sierra Leonean students won't be the tests alone. Rather, our approach addresses the whole student from quality instruction to an improved education environment to life skills.

In the past academic year, 30% of Peace Corps' students demonstrated an increase in confidence in math or science and 36% increased English proficiency. This may not mean a student will pass the BECE, but improved literacy and numeracy skills make them better prepared for whatever role they take on as youth and adults.

Also, about 150 colleague teachers demonstrated improved practices. For example, teachers are using learning materials more often or improving gender-equitable practices in the classroom. In

nearly every school we visit, teachers note that PCVs set the standard for professional conduct. We're quite proud of that but also look forward to reversing that dynamic so teachers are better prepared.

We continue to elevate life skills, especially youth planning for their future and positively sharing that future with families and leaders. From understanding reproductive health to career planning, more than 2,000 youth in 2012/13 had the opportunity to build the soft skills and reasoning to create their own futures. Following December 2013's *Girls' Leadership and Development Initiative (GLADI) Conference*, about 160 young women will have participated. PCVs will continue to activate this network of peer educators, empowering young women to "take the lead."

Moreover, we are layering our activities by implementing a robust Peace Corps Response program largely focused on improved teacher training. In the coming year we anticipate as many as 15 Response Volunteers will be placed at teacher training institutions. We will pilot activities at distance education centers throughout the country to improve the mentoring and in-service training available to teachers. Another cohort will focus on child-centered teaching, computer literacy, special needs, and

critical-need subjects.

Another layer is pilot activities in early childhood literacy. The single greatest constraint to academic success is low literacy and numeracy. In December of this year, we will launch our work to create peer-education reading programs. We hope to prepare high-performing secondary students to implement reading programs at the primary level. This is an exploratory year with PCVs designing activities that we will continue to refine. There is no doubt we'll struggle to find the right mix to make the program a success, but there is also no doubt of its importance.

We are quite proud that, Peace Corps/Sierra Leone can focus so much passion into one critical sector — especially education, which impacts every area of development. We know that each year of school reduces a girls' risk of early pregnancy and improves maternal and child health literacy. It is clear that critical thinking skills developed in school are a foundation for adopting change in agriculture and economic development. The ripples from education create waves.

We hope to ride those waves for impact in our secondary initiatives— Stomp Out Malaria in Africa, water and sanitation, and food security. These initiatives were purposefully selected because of their impact on the youth we see in (and out of) our schools. Loss of class time because of malaria and water

and food-borne illnesses is momentous. A lack diversified diet is hindering child development. Not to mention, the community-wide importance of each initiative.

Last year, PCVs created a malaria prevention bike ride stopping in communities from Kamakwie to Makeni as well as created a handbook integrating malaria into lessons for all three subjects and life skills. The ride this year will be in the south and PCVs will continue the effort for social mobilization during the universal bed net campaign prior to rainy season this May.

We'll be launching a school/ community gardening training in collaboration with SNAP and HKI. The activities are designed to provide sustainable income to schools and increase the availability of nutritious foods. While the school is our first point of contact, many Volunteers are already working to promote Essential Nutrition Actions (ENAs) in the greater community.

Volunteers are also working with students and their families to increase access to clean drinking water at schools and homes and develop good personal hygiene habits. Last year, in a number of communities, they invested nearly \$11,000 through Small Project Assistance (SPA) grants to construct more than 50 latrines in schools and homes. Connecting this to food preparation information has been a huge success in addressing health literacy.

It's been a busy year for the 81 PCVs and 32 staff. Growth over the next two years will mean that nearly 110 Volunteers and 20 Response Volunteer will deepen our work with youth. Over time, it's possible to imagine an entire generation leveraging improved critical thinking, English and life skills to enrich their own choices and communities.

Members of Friends of Sierra Leone created an enduring legacy over the decades. We appreciate the ongoing support to see that legacy thrive again in our many communities. Follow that legacy by friending PC Salone on Facebook and look for our full report and new website soon.

### Projects Report

As reported previously two projects were funded in May at a total cost of \$4500. Since then, thanks to many generous donors, our small projects funds have grown to over \$14,000. In December we hope to fund several new projects out of eleven proposals received since May. Our grant of up to \$2000 for a Peace Corps Volunteer secondary project was not used in 2013 because the country director left earlier this year. We have \$2452 remaining in that budget and we hope a new director will be selected soon so that a secondary project can be selected. For the fourth year in a row, the Daphne Sawyer-Dunn scholarship fund sent \$250 to the Paul School for the blind to be used for needy students. That budget line now stands at \$165, so we hope to get enough donations in Daphne's memory to continue this scholarship. Once again, thanks to all who are so faithful in donating to our projects fund. Our committee appreciated your support for our efforts to help small groups.

A project funded by Friends of Sierra Leone is mentioned in "The Magic Penny" Newsletter.

The Magic Penny is a United States based organization supporting an elementary school in Bompehtake, Sierra Leone.

"Because Bompehtoke is seaside, sand is a constant factor. The Magic Penny has long had a paving project on its to-do list and we can now happily report that the job will begin during the dry season in the upcoming fall/winter.

This project has been financed by a \$1210.00 donation from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Wisconsin (through the auspices of Judy Figi) and **an additional \$1250.00 grant from the Friends of Sierra Leone.**

## Current PCV Success Stories

Compiled by Allison Sinning

Examples of the work Peace Corps Volunteers are doing all across Sierra Leone

### Empowering Girls

By Suzy Khachaturyan - Pujehun, Pujehun District

This year in my Girls Club, I've been holding one-on-one meetings with each girl in my group, and it has been so rewarding! In each informal meeting, which takes place during lunch, free periods, or after school, I go through my short list of what to cover: give the girl her personal notebook she should bring to all meetings, go over the goal she set at our last meeting and how she plans to achieve it, ask about her favorite subject in school along with the most difficult, ask about when she studies, and then go through her entire day from morning to night and ask what chores and other tasks she is assigned at home.

With each meeting, the girl lights up at the thought of someone showing interest in her day-to-day life. Some need extra encouragement while others could go on talking for hours. I've learned that in asking about mundane things like daily chores, that's when students really open up and feel comfortable sharing a part of their life with you.

One student told me her goal is to be a primary school teacher like her mother, and that she wants to study science when she reaches Senior Secondary School. It puts a smile on my face to get students excited about their futures, and I intend to continue encouraging them as young ladies and future community leaders.

### PCV Collaboration to Improve the Quality of Education

By David MacDonald - Bumpe-Perri, Pujehun District

Now this success story has almost nothing to do with me and everything to do with Matthew Gendron, the previous Volunteer at my school. Bumpe-Perri is small — we only have a Junior Secondary School and we draw students from the five closest villages. We are in the "the country" without a doubt.

We recently received our Basic Education Certificate Exam (BECE) results. BECE is the national exam required at the end of Junior Secondary School education (middle school) to move to Senior Secondary School (high school). We are #1 in all of Pujehun! Over half of all the students passed both Mathematics and Science (the two areas that Matthew taught - I teach only Math). Three students received a three in Math! At least one received a two in science!

We also had seven students get a 1 in Religious & Moral Education (RME) thanks to diligent teachers from the community. We had one student receive an aggregate score of 16 and others 18,18,19, and 20. These are all excellent scores.

I can take credit for none of this but I am happy to report the successes of the man who came before me. He was not alone though; my principal Dauda Rogers also deserves much credit as he pushes his students hard. Without compensation, he provides light at school each school night between 8:00 and 10:00 so that students can come and study. Perhaps due to Principal Roger's force of personality, other teachers are diligent and teach when assigned. They are good.

Due to this success, our school is slated to expand into Senior Secondary School territory. Radio announcers often commented on how our little "country school" beat the bigger city schools.

### **Joe Opala a Sierra Leonean!**

Joseph Opala, one of Friends of Sierra Leone's lifetime honorary members, was awarded Sierra Leone citizenship by President Koroma in a ceremony at State House on May 20, 2013, where he took the "Oath of Allegiance." Sierra Leone's Ambassador to the United States, Honorable Bockarie Stephens, attended the event along with Opala's wife, Fatmata, and his adopted son, Alpha Kanu.

On December 12th, Ambassador Stephens formally presented Mr. Opala with his Sierra Leone passport at the Sierra Leone Embassy in Washington. Several Friends of Sierra Leone attended, including Peggy Murrah, Gary Schulze, and Mike and Wendy Diliberti. Joe is well known for his research on Bunce Island and the Sierra Leone - Gullah connection. He headed up a conservation project on Bunce Island from 2010 to 2012, but recently handed it over to a Sierra Leonean team, though he is continuing as the group's historical advisor.

## Book Review:

*Volunteers in the African Bush: Memoirs from Sierra Leone.* Edited by David Read Barker (Sierra Leone from 1965 to 1967). Dog Ear Publishing, \$15.00 (paperback), \$3.99 (Kindle and Nook).

This book is a collection of 21 memoirs by Volunteers in the third Peace Corps group posted to Sierra Leone: rural, agricultural and chiefdom development from 1965 to 1967. In the absence of modern social media, a country-of-service affiliate, or even a national returned PCV organization, members of the group soon lost touch with one another except for a few enduring friendships. Using Google and WhitePages.com 45 years later, editor David Barker located 53 of the 76 PCVs in the group and persuaded more than half of those still living to write about their experiences. The contributors were posted to all four of Sierra Leone's Regions, ten of the 12 Districts, and 20 of the Chiefdoms.

Both the Peace Corps and Sierra Leone were in their infancy when the events recounted here occurred. The Peace

Corps had no experience in recruiting, training, and placing Volunteers to work in chiefdom towns, and the catastrophic social disruptions that swept the country in the 1990s were still a generation away. The youthful idealism of the Kennedy era, the can-do spirit, and the ethos of support and hospitality among Volunteers are themes that pervade most of the chapters, along with loneliness, isolation, illness, and feelings of inadequacy. Terrifying encounters with *tiefman*, witch doctors, tree devils, snakes, crocodiles, and maniacal lorry drivers vie with the satisfactions of constructing schools, providing basic medical care, and introducing new rice varieties.

The paperback and e-book versions of the book are supported by a blog, [www.volunteers-in-the-african-bush.com](http://www.volunteers-in-the-african-bush.com), which contains updated bios of the authors and links to Sierra Leone. The book has received five five-star reviews on Amazon.com and a positive review at [peacecorpsworldwide.org](http://peacecorpsworldwide.org). It is now among a handful of collective memoirs of one or more groups, all from the Sargent Shriver era.

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**Membership:** \$25 per Individual

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Membership in *National Peace Corps Association* (\$35) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Total Remitted** \$

Membership dues support operations for Friends of Sierra Leone, including meetings, newsletter, and the website. All other donations support projects in Sierra Leone.

Dues and other contributions to Friends of Sierra Leone are fully tax-deductible. The \$35 membership fees for National Peace Corps Association are **not** tax-deductible.

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