



# Friends of Sierra Leone

## April 2025 Newsletter

### 2025 & 2026 Annual Meetings

We are excited to announce our 2025 Friends of Sierra Leone Annual Meeting will be via Zoom on **Saturday, May 3rd, starting at 10am!**

Join us on Zoom for 10am to 2pm ET to

**2025 FoSL Virtual Annual Meeting Saturday, May 3rd**

**10:00am Opening Addresses**

**10:15am Peace Corps Sierra Leone Director Tim Miller**

**11:20am Peace Corps Museum Director Zack Kilm**

**12:20pm US Ambassador Bryan Hunt**

**12:55pm Committee Reports**

**Eastern Daylight Time**

**Register for Zoom Today!**

hear from an outstanding list of speakers, including the new Peace Corps Sierra Leone Director, **Tim Miller**, along with current Salone Peace Corps Volunteers discussing their projects, Peace Corps Museum Director **Zack Kilm** highlighting the work that they are doing to preserve the history and legacy of Peace Corps, as well as current US Ambassador to Sierra Leone **Bryan Hunt**. You will also hear from our committee chairs about what FoSL's been doing over the past year regarding projects, advocacy, fundraising and membership! To attend this free virtual meeting you need to register for Zoom using the following link:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tj0vdOmspj0tH9AOSa-plmqghMFAM8WvO44P#/registration>

See the agenda graphic (left) for more details!

We hope to see you on the Zoom call for some or all of the annual meeting on Saturday, 5/3! If you have any questions, please reach out to [info@fosalone.org](mailto:info@fosalone.org)

Also, as of right now, Friends of Sierra Leone is planning to host the 2026 Annual Meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone. More information and details to come soon as we confirm lodging and other venues in Freetown! Stay up-to-date by joining our mailing list: <https://fosalone.org/home/listserv.php>

# Advocacy

## by Marco Cavallaro

As we welcome the vibrant energy of spring, we are pleased to share updates from the Friends of Sierra Leone community and highlight the remarkable advocacy work being done by our members. Our quarterly newsletter brings you news of inspiring discussions, ongoing efforts to raise awareness, and meaningful connections within our Sierra Leonean community. Friends of Sierra Leone remains committed to supporting the Peace Corps mission, both in-country and at home.

### Stateside Updates:

#### **Peace Corps Funding Extended & DOGE visits Peace Corps HQ**

The Peace Corps will continue to operate under a continuing resolution that extends funding through September 30, 2025. This means programs—including those in Sierra Leone—can continue without disruption while Congress works on next year's budget.

In early April DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) began visiting the Peace Corps headquarters. Feedback from the DOGE visits is not yet available at this moment in time, and we plan to provide updates to our members as information becomes available.

### Salone Advocacy:

#### **January 2025: Worldwide Mobility's Insightful Zoom Presentation**

In January, we had the privilege of hosting **Worldwide Mobility** for a thought-provoking Zoom presentation. The session provided a comprehensive look at global



mobility issues and their impact on Sierra Leone. CJ Stanfill and Lamin Mansaray provided a closer look at how access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities intersect with mobility challenges, and how organizations like **Worldwide Mobility** are working to address these issues on a global scale. The conversation sparked critical thinking about how we can support long-term solutions for the people of Sierra Leone and the broader West African region. Please visit [mobilityworldwide.org](https://mobilityworldwide.org) to learn more and get involved.

#### **February 2025: Arlene Golembiewski and the Sherbro Foundation**

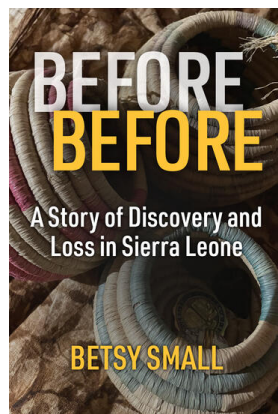


February's Zoom meeting was a special one, with Arlene Golembiewski joining us to discuss her important work with the Sherbro Foundation. Arlene shared the incredible progress the foundation has made in empowering local communities in the Sherbro region, especially through their sustainable development initiatives. From education and healthcare to environmental conservation, the Sherbro Foundation is at the forefront of promoting long-term change in Sierra Leone. Arlene's work and dedication are an inspiration to us all, and her insights on grassroots development sparked engaging conversations about how we can contribute to similar efforts. You can visit the website at [sherbrofoundation.org](https://sherbrofoundation.org) to learn more and get involved.

#### **March 2025: Betsy Small Zoom and Her Book "Before Before: A Story of Discovery and Loss in Sierra Leone"**

March brought us an enriching and collaborative discussion led by **Betsy**

Small around her powerful book, ***Before Before: A Story of Discovery and Loss in Sierra Leone***. Betsy's personal account of her journey to Sierra Leone, her discoveries about the country's history, and the loss she encountered through her connections with the people left a lasting impression on all who attended. Her storytelling is an evocative reminder of the human resilience and strength that defines Sierra Leone's history, and her book continues to be a valuable resource for those seeking to understand the complexities of the country's past and present. The conversation surrounding Betsy's experiences fostered a deep reflection on the broader themes of grief, recovery, and the importance of cultural understanding. For additional information and access to the book and other resources please visit [BetsySmall.com](http://BetsySmall.com).



### **Looking Ahead**

As we move into the next quarter, we remain committed to fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and supporting efforts that bring sustainable change to Sierra Leone. We are excited about the upcoming opportunities for collaboration and engagement, and we look forward to continuing these important conversations with all of you. Your participation, advocacy, and support continue to make a significant impact in the lives of those in Sierra Leone and beyond.

Thank you for being part of this extraordinary community. We value each of you and your continued dedication to the mission of Friends of Sierra Leone.

## **Announcements**

For those who are looking for friends you've lost contact with or who have an announcement others may be interested in, this is your place to post it. Please email your request to [info@fosalone.org](mailto:info@fosalone.org). Announcements regarding marriages, births, new jobs, deaths, or any other item of interest are welcome. Keep in mind newsletters usually come out twice a year.

### **In Remembrance**

#### **Stella Kirkendale**

RPCV Stella Kirkendale died on February 21, 2025, from natural causes while swimming at the YMCA, where she worked as a lifeguard. Stella served in the Peace Corps as an agricultural extension agent from 1983 to 1985 in Jaima Nimikoro (Kono District). She lived in Durham NC and had over 30 years' experience in global and US public health programs. Stella was a passionate advocate for health equality and humanitarian causes. She participated in many rallies and protests by marching, serving as an ASL interpreter, and dancing with the Raging Grannies. Stella made lots of good trouble! Her family is planning a celebration of Stella's life on her 65th birthday, July 12, 2025.



#### **Laura Whitson**

RPCV Laura Whitson served in Lunsar and Bo from 1974 to 1977. She died of Parkinsons in recent months.

Thanks to those who contributed.



## Bryan Meeker Talk

In December, we were fortunate to have Sierra Leone RPCV and longtime FoSL Member Bryan Meeker discuss his memoir on his Peace Corps in Sierra Leone via Zoom. ***Be Steadfast: A Peace Corps Journey in Sierra Leone*** is a



deeply personal memoir of a Peace Corps' volunteer's service in Sierra Leone. Absent

during the decade-long devastating conflict, the Peace Corps returned in 2010 as a symbol of unity and progress.

While the Peace Corps had worked in Sierra Leone for decades before the

war, many of the traditions and cultural norms changed, leaving these new volunteers to forge brave new paths. Being a volunteer is a transformative experience, expressed in this work with honesty and with an immense amount of love. It was a wonderful talk that, for those that attended, brought back so many vivid memories of serving in Sierra Leone. We thank Bryan for not only speaking to our organization but for also writing a book that we can all relate to as Sierra Leone RPCVs. If you want to watch his talk, it is still available on our website: Login -> FoSL Members -> Special Content.

You can purchase his book, *Be Steadfast*, on Amazon at: <https://www.amazon.com/Be-Steadfast-Peace-Journey-Sierra/dp/1727870573>

## President's Address

by Michael Lee

What an exciting two years it has been as your president of Friends of Sierra Leone! During my time as president, we have seen an increase in social media presence, an increase in participation from FoSL members through virtual lectures and annual meetings, an increase in funding for projects throughout Sierra Leone and strengthened advocacy efforts for issues here in America as well as in Salone. I am proud of what we have accomplished and I am excited for the future of FoSL! Thank you to all our donors, board members, volunteers and guests over the past two years; it is remarkable what a small nonprofit organization like ours can do with limited funds and extremely low administrative costs. And, again, we can be proud of ourselves for the fact that 100% of all FoSL donations continue to go directly to the communities that we love throughout sweet Salone!

## FoSL Election

We will be holding Friends of Sierra Leone Board Elections at the end of April/beginning of May. Please be on the look out for information in your email so you can vote in the election. You will need to be a paid member of FoSL to be able to vote in the election.

We recently sent out an email for members to vote on a FoSL Bylaw amendment. We will be having a change in the office of President and the Bylaw Amendment was to allow for the office of President to be held by Co-Presidents. This amendment has passed by those who voted. Thank you.



# Projects Report

by Jim Hanson

The first quarter of 2025 has been a slower time for applications to our projects committee. Most of the applicants were turned down due to poorly thought-out plans or had no real community involvement. We have advised several communities of changes that we thought were needed, and they will be reapplying this month.

Despite that, we have gotten some great feedback from some of our recently-funded projects. For the second year, FoSL has funded **Tenki for Born, Inc.**, this time for \$4000, to support their midwife training program in Kenema. The training was a great success, training 43 midwives and nurses, who achieved a 98% success rate on their skills exams. One of the nursing students from last year's training in Bo, was a presenter this year. The group will be going back to do some follow-up and training in July.

The **Mamaka Agricultural Project** is still going strong. They are working on a new rice and cassava processing center which will be powered completely by solar energy. FoSL has granted them \$2685 for the water system and latrines for the facility. They have also received over \$21,000 in private, earmarked donations for this center. The U.S. coordinator for the project, **RPCV Chris Siegler**, just went to Mamaka, and was there to meet U.S. **Ambassador Bryan Hunt** when he visited the project.

A couple of long-delayed projects are also underway at this time. The **United Brethren Senior Secondary School** in Lungi was granted \$4000 in December to furnish and equip their new science building. Banking delays dragged on for three months. Finally, the funds were received and the students are now

studying in well-stocked biology, chemistry, and physics labs. Another project, the **Tawuya Health Clinic** ambulance, in rural Kambia, was approved last October, but delays with the Peace Corps Partnership Program, which was providing funds for the vehicle, only became available last month. We quickly sent our funds, \$1025, to pay for the conversion of the motorbike to an ambulance. That work is now underway. This vehicle will be a life-saving addition to the clinic in this remote region.



And finally, we just received the final report from the **Kassi Community Primary School** rehabilitation project. FoSL granted them \$3000 last year to upgrade and secure the school compound. The results look great! You can see all of the results from projects that FoSL funds on our website, at [fosalone.org](http://fosalone.org).

In other good news, our budget balance stands at \$34,277, so we will be able to fund many more projects in the coming months. I would like to thank all of our donors, large and small, who make our work possible. We will be looking for more great, community-based projects to support in the coming months. Thank you for your support.



## More Project Pictures





## A Wish Fulfilled: A Return to their Origin after 36 years

*Freetown, Sierra Leone — November 24, 2024*

Leon and Regina Poeske (pay-ski) have always cherished a dream: to return to the country where their story began. After 36 years, that dream became a reality when the couple and their three adult children embarked on an emotional journey back to Sierra Leone, the West African nation where they met while serving as Peace Corps Volunteers. Regina described it as, “An opportunity for our sons to see where their parents met. We called this our Origin Story!”



*Leon and Regina in 1987*

In 1986, Leon, a Wisconsin native, and Regina, from the Philadelphia area, arrived in Sierra Leone as recent college graduates, eager to make a difference. Over two years of service, they fell in love—with each other and the vibrant culture and warm-hearted people of Salone.

“Peace Corps Sierra Leone changed our lives,” said Leon. “It’s where we discovered the power of community and where we found each other. It’s always been a part of our story, and we’ve longed to return.”

After their service ended in 1988, the couple returned to the United States, married, and raised three children while building fulfilling careers. Though they often reminisced about their time in Sierra Leone, circumstances prevented their return.

“First, the civil war in the 1990s made it impossible to return,” explained Regina, referencing the devastating 11-year conflict depicted in the movie, *Blood Diamonds*. “Then, when we planned to go for our 25th wedding anniversary, the Ebola outbreak forced us to cancel. It felt like the odds were always against us.”

In 2024, with Leon retired and Regina accepting short-term work in neighboring Guinea, the stars finally aligned. They reconnected with Sophia Caulker, one of Regina’s former colleagues, who enthusiastically helped plan their long-awaited trip.



*Regina and the students*



## A Wish Fulfilled: A Return to their Origin after 36 years



*Regina, Sophia, and Leon walking to the school*

“We had tried to reach Sophia over the years,” Leon shared. “We sent letters but never knew if they arrived. Given the war and Ebola, we even wondered if she had survived.”

For two weeks in November, Leon and Regina immersed themselves in Sierra Leonean life, retracing steps in Freetown and rural areas. Their three adult children joined for the second week to share in the experience. The family even attended a Thanksgiving dinner with current Peace Corps Volunteers hosted by the Peace Corps Director, Natalie Gill-Mensah.

“Over the years, we always heard our parents talk about Sierra Leone,” said their son Jake. “They would speak Krio to each other and reminisce, so it was amazing to finally see how they lived.”

### A Poignant Moment at Bompotoke

One of the most moving parts of the trip was visiting a school in Bompotoke, a remote coastal village accessible only by boat. Through The Magic Penny organization and Friends of Sierra Leone, a nonprofit, the Poeskes had helped fund an addition to the school.

“It was overwhelming to see the joy and excitement in their faces,” said their son Francis.

Leon reflected, “These children reminded me of the students we taught years ago, so full of potential and dreams.”

“The schoolchildren were fascinated by our every move,” added Judd, another son. “They held our hands and giggled when we spoke. It was a truly moving moment.”

The family donated solar-powered lights and phone chargers made by Solight Design for the teachers and school supplies for the students. These gifts addressed critical needs in a village without electricity.

“Bompotoke, like many remote villages, struggles without electricity,” explained Leon. “These lights will give teachers and students the opportunity to work after sunset.”



*Judd, Jake, and Fran with students and the headmaster*

## A Wish Fulfilled: A Return to their Origin after 36 years

Regina added, “The lights symbolize more than just illumination. They represent hope, connection, and the transformative power of education, even in the most remote areas.”

The headmaster expressed heartfelt gratitude, and the family enjoyed fresh coconut water, a simple. Yet touching gesture of hospitality. As they departed, hundreds of schoolchildren sang and waved goodbye, creating an unforgettable moment.

### A Full-Circle Moment

“It’s hard to put into words what this trip has meant to us,” said Regina. “Coming back to Sierra Leone feels like coming home. It’s a full-circle moment—a chance to give back to a place that gave us so much.”



*Regina with the school's Headmaster*

The impact of their visit extended beyond their time in Sierra Leone. Upon returning to the U.S., the family made additional donations to the school through The Magic Penny organization, with one son’s employer offering a matching contribution.

For Leon and Regina, this journey was not only a reconnection with their past but also a celebration of enduring love, community, and shared humanity. They return to their lives in America with memories that will inspire their family for years to come.

### For further information

Friends of Sierra Leone (FoSL) <https://www.fosalone.org/home/about.ph>

Friends of Sierra Leone is a nonprofit organization founded by Returned Peace Corps Volunteers and their Sierra Leonean friends to support Sierra Leone through community-driven initiatives.

The Magic Penny <https://www.themagicpenny.org/>

The Magic Penny, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit supporting education, economic, and agricultural projects in rural Sierra Leone, empowering local communities to achieve sustainable growth.

Solight Design <https://solight-design.com/>

Solight Design is an American company that manufactures portable solar lanterns and solar phone chargers. They give 10% of their profits to charity and assist in disaster areas and to people who otherwise have no access to electricity. The company was co-founded by architecture professor Alice Min Soo Chun.



A Wish Fulfilled: A Return to their Origin after 36 years



Regina and Leon enjoying the fresh coconut water.



Leon and the school's Headmaster



Francis, Sophia, and Jake



The Poeske Family with Sophia



## A Wish Fulfilled: A Return to their Origin after 36 years



*School Addition 1*



*School Addition 2*



*School Addition 3*



*Schoolchildren escort the Poeske Family*



*Poeske Family with students and staff*

**Check the date on your mailing label or subject line. Is it time to renew? If there is no date, or if the date is some time in the past, it's time to renew! Fill out and mail the form below with your check.**

**Or renew through our website:**

**<https://fosalone.org/mbrship/>**

FRIENDS OF SIERRA LEONE MEMBERSHIP FORM	
Name (include maiden) _____	FoSL needs your participation. Circle your areas of interest:  Advocacy  Education  Membership  Newsletter/Communications  Projects  Events   Would you be willing to be part of a network to receive information and contact your members of Congress at important times? (Please include your email address.)  Yes
Address _____	
City _____ State _____ Zip _____	
Home Phone _____ Email _____	
Day Phone _____ Occupation _____	
Relationship to SL (e.g., Sierra Leonean, PC, etc.) _____	
Sierra Leone Home _____ Years _____ to _____	
Membership: \$25 per Individual \$ _____	
Donation to Projects: \$ _____	
FoSL Circle \$1000 and up Supporter \$500 to \$999 Sponsor \$100 to \$499 Friend \$50 - \$99	
Overseas Mail (add \$10) \$ _____	
Total Remitted	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">\$ _____</div>
Membership dues support operations for Friends of Sierra Leone, including meetings, newsletters, and the website. All other donations support FoSL projects in Sierra Leone.	
Dues and other contributions to Friends of Sierra Leone are fully tax-deductible.	
<b>Thank you for your support! Please return this form with your check made payable to Friends of Sierra Leone to the address at the right. →</b>	
<div style="text-align: right;"> <b>Friends of Sierra Leone</b>  <b>P.O. Box 667553</b>  <b>Houston, TX 77266-7553</b> </div>	

**Friends of Sierra Leone**  
**P.O. Box 667553**  
**Houston, TX 77266-7553**

**Web: fosalone.org**



**Address Service Requested**

Board Officers	President	Michael Lee (Old Bridge, New Jersey)
	Vice President	Aiah Fanday (Upper Marlboro, Maryland)
	Secretary	Patty Bruzek (Lombard, Illinois)
	Treasurer	Mark Hager (Houston, Texas)
	Public Affairs	Amadu Massally (Sachse, Texas)
	Public Affairs	Jim Sheahan (Atlanta, Georgia)
	At Large	Michael D Thomas (Arlington, Virginia)
	At Large	Tom Hull (Grantham, New Hampshire)
	At Large	Anthony McMillon (Fort Washington, Maryland)
	At Large	Peter Andersen (Elk River, Minnesota)
	At Large	Peggy Murrah (Social Circle, Georgia)
	At Large	Gary Schulze (New York, New York)
	At Large	Brother Joseph Yakuba Fofanah (Lanham, Maryland)
	At Large	Scott Leaman (Grass Valley, California)
	At Large	Marco Cavallaro (Santa Clarita, California)
Committee Chairs	Advocacy	Jim Sheahan (Atlanta, Georgia)
		Marco Cavallaro (Santa Clarita, California)
	Annual Meeting	Michael Lee (Old Bridge, New Jersey)
		Aiah Fanday (Upper Marlboro, Maryland)
	Education	Piper O'Keefe (Washington, DC)
		Scott Leaman (Grass Valley, California)
	Fundraising	Michael Lee (Old Bridge, New Jersey)
	Membership	Hannah Benga (Sarasota, Florida)
Projects		Jim Hanson (Social Circle, Georgia)
	Web Site	Jamie Brown (Kaneohe, Hawaii)