



'This is for Liberia'

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'Abandonment! Being a volunteer requires abandonment.' This statement was made with quiet passion and aplomb by Timothy Howard, a Shirley Ann Sullivan Educational Foundation (SASEF)-Youth Volunteers Liberia (YVL) volunteer. I found this to be a curious statement. "To be a true volunteer at times you have to "abandon" your personal affairs for the sake of others. The focus is on what you can do for others not yourself,' he added. As a UN Volunteer from Trinidad and Tobago, working as an Advocacy, Information/Communications Specialist for the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), it was the first time that I had heard volunteerism referred to as 'abandonment'.

A student at the African Methodist Episcopal University, 24-year-old Timothy has been volunteering with SASEF-YVL for the last 18 months. With him are fellow youth volunteers, 22-year olds Fred Weedor, Director of the SASEF and President of the YVL, and Stephanie King,

SASEF-YVL volunteer, who are nodding their heads in agreement. Volunteerism has been 'interesting and challenging' for all three as they have had to adapt their skills, and learn new ones, in order to serve the communities where they work as volunteers.

These three young people are among the best and brightest of Liberia, a country where up to 83% of the population is considered illiterate. Liberian volunteers with professional skills are in the minority. Fourteen years of conflict created a breakdown in educational continuity that has resulted in major skills gaps at all levels of the socio-cultural, economic and professional hierarchy. They know that they are the fortunate ones and that they must volunteer their skills, time and energy to develop Liberia. It is now clear to me what Timothy and the others were saying. They have willingly 'abandoned' themselves in service to community and country.



This photo was taken during a Education for Employment workshop break at the Atlantic Hotel, 26 June, 2010.

We were evaluating the Liberia Children Rescue & Educational Foundation. The President's (Mr Frances Kennedy) mother had suddenly passed and we were asked to review his orphanage to ensure it met with Liberia's laws, i.e. the day-to-day running of the orphanage. Plus we presented a new architectural 'child friendly' design and three self-sustaining mechanisms: bakery, gardening, and basic health care to serve the community.

This is one of the methodologies in facilitating our Education for Employment project.

The SASEF-YVL volunteers are listed from left to right: Timothy Howard, Vivian Nah, Tom K. Akuffo, Stephanie King, Beatrice King, Tedi Wiles, Fred Weedor, Ophelia Karyeah and Fatumata Sheriff.

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Children of St Pius Catholic School, Harbel, Margibi County, Liberia.

'We understand the challenges, but we are up for it. We have been mocked, ridiculed, laughed at by some of the people in the communities that we have been trying to assist,' says Fred. 'They cannot imagine why we volunteer. We know though that the only way for Liberia to find her feet again is through Liberians, and I stress on Liberians, volunteering their skills to develop our country. We welcome the assistance of our international partners, but it is important that Liberians serve as well,' he added. 'The road is tedious and risky; you are volunteering your life on behalf of others. It requires commitment and integrity,' says Stephanie. One of the challenges they have faced is being taken seriously as young Liberians educated in Liberia. There is a presumption that because they have been educated in Liberia they do not have the same level of skills as Liberians educated abroad. 'Imagine going to a community to volunteer and the people that you are trying to serve are questioning your validity because you are educated here in Liberia? It can be disheartening but you continue

to push because there is a force within you that keeps resonating, "This is for Liberia",' says Timothy. Timothy was referring to challenges they faced when setting up their Movement for Maternal Health and Community Hygiene project. They went on the offensive by actively engaging the community in extensive dialogue, individually and collectively, about the merits of the project, clearly outlining the benefits to the community – both in the long term and short term. Fred admitted that it was an enriching experience for them, saying with a smile, 'volunteerism connects you. And we definitely connected with that community in a real way.'

In response to this challenge, SASEF-YVL initiated the Give Us a Chance awareness campaign. Launched on the International Day of Youth, 12 August 2010, this campaign promotes the hiring of Liberians educated in Liberia, thus giving national pride and value to Liberian educational institutions. For the launch, youth organisations participated in a round table discussion attended

by the Minister of Youth and Sports, the Honourable Edwina Tarpeh, and presented their organisations' missions, visions, goals, programmes and projects. 'We have to give youth educated in Liberia the opportunity to prove themselves. Liberia needs all Liberians, not just the few,' says Stephanie with a beautiful smile. SASEF-YVL has also had several awareness sessions with youth organisations on the importance of education, skills development, HIV/Aids awareness, hygiene, and sexual and gender-based violence.

Their confidence and determination is palpable. It is that dogged determination that has contributed to the success of SASEF-YVL's ongoing Education for Employment programme with the St Pius Catholic School in Harbel, Margibi County. In 2010, the programme engaged 25 children between the ages of 9 and 15 in projects aimed at environmental challenges. This year, while writing in notebooks given to them by the organisation, the children have focused on documenting educational challenges with the idea that SASEF-YVL will assist in finding solutions to those challenges. 'It is an exciting project for us,' says Timothy, 'because it really allows the kids to express how they feel without worrying about being punished for speaking out. So far, it has given us great insight into what

the kids think their educational challenges are and where we might be able to help.'

When I asked them about the future of volunteerism in Liberia, they all said that there should be greater collaboration between volunteer-involving organisations so that the benefits of volunteerism can be maximised for Liberia's development. They lauded the recent formation of the Liberia Volunteer Co-ordination Committee for Development (LVCC4D), constituted especially for the launching of the year's activities to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV+10), as a great start towards this objective. 'Despite the challenges we are committed,' said a smiling Fred. 'By our example, and through our efforts, we are seeing more and more young people willing to volunteer for Liberia's development. This is exciting to watch as we know that they will learn in the process that volunteerism also helps to develop employable skills. And for us that is a great thing!'

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Notes

SASEF's mission is to provide education to children and youth throughout the world through educational programmes that identify and implement solutions impacting the development of children and youth. The organisation collaborates with youth organisations, like YVL, that support the vision to develop self-sustaining people and improve the quality of life for future generations.

Participant at a SASEF-YVL workshop for the Give Us a Chance programme.

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