

BRIGHT START-SIERRA LEONE



Issue 1: Aug 2022



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Dear Bright Start-Sierra Leone supporters,

Welcome to our inaugural newsletter. We are excited you have joined us on this journey to support children and youth in Devil Hole and Sierra Leone at large in their educational and developmental journey. This initiative was founded by Ishmail Barrie and Dr. Linda Vakunta in 2022. However, both have worked together for over ten years implemented education, vocational, health and research initiatives in various parts of Sierra Leone. In particular Ishmail Barrie with support from Dr. Linda Vakunta operated a primary and secondary school from 2014-2022 in Devil Hole. The school had over 220 students and stayed there because of lack of physical space. During that time, both learned more about the issues that affects a child's learning and development. They also became acutely aware of need for supporting young people thrive. At the core of Bright Start-Sierra Leone, we are concerned with creating programs, and environments that foster positive childhood and youth development.

In this newsletter we bring to you some incredible programs we have implemented or have underway. These include a clinic renovation, providing desks for schools, supporting the construction of a primary school, visitors from the USA and the beginnings of our **Education Center** construction.

You will also learn about some wonderful supporters who have joined us on this journey.

We are excited about the impact Bright Start-Sierra Leone is making. Feel free to contact us to learn more about our different initiative and ways you can contribute.

Bright Start-Sierra Leone Team



Building programs and environments for Positive Childhood/Youth Development

We believe that children and youth deserve healthy childhood and developmental experiences to be productive, creative and thriving leaders in their communities.



Memory Project Partnership

Fostering Lifelong Health Begins at Birth- Clinic Renovation

In July 2022 two volunteers from the Memory Project organization, Abha Thakkar and Connie Bettin traveled to Devil Hole bringing portraits and pictures of **1500 school going kids**. The partnership with memory project started in 2021 where pictures of pupils were taken and sent over for printing and painting. Memory Project is a USA based NGO focused on connecting youth around the world through art. This **partnership included six schools in the Western area** and distribution occurred over 3 days.

Gratitude- We thank all volunteer staff from Bright Start-Sierra Leone

for their hard work and support- Mr. Eric Koroma, Mr. Ibrahim Fofanah, Oratu McCulley, Kadigatu Sesay, Effuah Haffner, Mariatu. K. Conteh, Willie Frank Bangura, Saidu Ibrahim Sesay, Binta Fatmata Bah, Francess Ansumana, and Aminata Kamara.

Supporting Schools

Many schools in the Western Area are overpopulated and poorly equipped. As a result of Bright Start-Sierra Leone's partnership with Memory Project, we were able to support several schools with critical improvement donations. These included cement for the building of a primary school in a smaller town in the Western Area. We also made desk

donations for certain schools. See photos above and below.

Borah Maternal Clinic Renovation

Another crucial project from the partnership was the renovation of the only clinic in Devil Hole where most women give birth. On their visit, the memory project volunteers noticed that the clinic leaked when it rains, further the floor was quite unsanitary. This has been a concern to the community for years as many believe that user pick up minor and major illness from such conditions. Bright Start-Sierra Leone team on the ground led by Ishmail Barrie, who is also a civil engineer renovated the roof and flooring. See photos above

School Benches and Clinic renovations



Pictures (left) -Memory Project volunteers Abha Thakkar and Connie Bettin with Ishmail Barrie and Eric Koroma with clinic nurse in Devil Hole.

Pictures (right) - Desk donations and clinic roof renovations. See new roof (blue) above.



Education Center in Construction

Preliminary analysis of the community needs and resources assessment (CNRA) show that the Devil Hole community needs more than just a school but an education center that caters to various training and learning needs.



Brief History - In 2014 Ishmail Barrie, a resident of Devil saw and heard from many parents who were concerned about their young children walking distances for school and having to cross major roads to make it to school. Furthermore, they struggled with school fees, learning supplies cost, transportation and lunch money for their kids. This inspired him to begin a school using someone's unfinished house. The school grew to 220 students and 17 teachers plus principal. This number was only curbed due to lack of space. Due to the Ebola crisis and COVID, the school struggled to sustain itself and had to close. Of the enrolled students 50% have re-enrolled in other schools, though the parents still struggle with associated cost and 50% have not re-enrolled in school.



2017, Dr. Linda Vakunta, visit Susu Town Faith Academy

Next Chapter- Land Donation and assessment- January of 2022 Ishmail and Dr Linda Vakunta reconnect to re-open the closed school. Ishmail Barrie donated his personal land for the construction of a building given that was a major issue in the past.



Pic: 2022. Ishmail Barrie donates land for education center.

Both have worked to have the land in the organisation's name. The team has also made several contact with the education ministry to discuss the gap and need in the community. Those engagements will continue.

Both soon realized there are other needs in the community such as many of the young people in the community who are not engaged in meaningful work. Furthermore, there are other factors that impact learning, skills development that is important to consider tackling simultaneously.

Bright Start Education Center- It is evident that the community needs more than just a school. Hence BSSL has embarked on a community needs and resource assessment for Devil Hole to understand available resources and gaps. Data has been collected and is currently being analyzed. Findings will inform building use and programming. Simultaneously foundation construction for the building has commenced.



July 2022, Foundation for building

Partnership Opportunities- this will be no small undertaking. We welcome co-creators interested in either providing financial support and or other resources that moves us towards creating a learning space to fill gaps we identify in the community needs and resource assessment work.

Community Needs and Resource Assessment



Youth engaging at the Focus Group Discussion session



Focus Group Discussions

Mid-July 2022, BSSL team undertook a community needs and resource assessment. While there is national data and research that speaks to the national issues facing children and youth's development. We were curious about current thinking on the ground. On July 17th, 2022 the team in Sierra Leone held focus group discussions in the community. The purposed was to understand challenges faced by children and youth in the area of accessing quality education and to understand the nature of livelihood opportunities in and needed by the community.

The FDG brought together individuals of different demographics including children, out of school youth, parents, teachers, school-going pupils, and community stakeholders. A total of 30 individuals participated answering eight questions that were co- developed by Kerry Zaleski, Linda Vakunta, Eric Koroma and Ishmail Barrie.

The team on the ground is analyzing data collected. Professor Lori Diprete Brown a lecturer at UW Madison and founder of 4W, an initiative of the University of Wisconsin Madison whose mission is to be a convener and leading voice in education, applied research, and impactful engagement to promote gender equity, global wellbeing, and the full participation of women in society—has assigned a student from her course to conduct both a desktop community needs and resource assessment for Devil Hole as well as conduct a qualitative analysis of recent data collected. Findings from this work will guide BSSL's overall work particularly the development of the education center.

Organizational Financial Health

The beginnings of Bright Start- Sierra Leone was February 2022 with an initial focus on re-opening the school that operated from 2014-2020. We started reaching out to friends and potential supporters.

- Between February 2022 and July 2022 we raised \$6,658- significantly 36% of that amount was by an award from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Wisconsin-Madison. This was a big booster for our efforts.
- \$6200 was utilized to put up the structure foundation.
- \$600 was used for surveying and getting official land documents in the name of the organization.

Future:

- A priority for the organization is completing the educational center.
- Preliminary findings from the study shows a need for economic opportunities for women and youth. Thus the organization will be exploring income generating activities and trainings. We welcome partners with this initiative.



Gratitude Box

At Bright Start-Sierra Leone we believe in cultivating the habit of being grateful and acknowledging the good things and good people that make the world better and our organization work. We thank the following:

- The hardworking volunteers on the ground who give their best in serving others.
- Our founding board members, in addition to co-founders Linda Vakunta and Ishmail Barrie, Karin Wolf, Kerry Zaleski and Amy Van Aartsen.
- Professor Lori Diprete Brown who always has great counsel.
- Thank you Memory Project
- Our financial donors who have made completion of the education center possible. Special gratitude to our two largest donors to date RPCV Madison and Dr. Linda Vakunta



Contact Us

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