

**Arts Education International** is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that provides arts outreach programs and vocational training for orphaned and abandoned children in West Africa. We currently have 5 programs in Sierra Leone and Ghana, serving over 700 children. Our sustainable, community-based arts programs employ renowned indigenous artisans with extensive experience working with at-risk youth.

**We Believe:**

- \* The arts provide children with the opportunity to confront trauma on their own terms.
- \* The arts facilitate community reconciliation and prevent the isolation faced by orphaned and abandoned children in Africa
- \* The arts are a powerful tool for social change.

We provide workshops in practical arts, drama, music and dance. Our practical arts workshops emphasize locally sourced materials and are taught by mentors indigenous to each site's location. Our vocational training program provides children with the skills to create crafts that are indispensable to their communities, including batik fabric used for clothing and furnishing, baskets used for fish-catching and food storage, and beadwork used for adornment and ceremony. We also provide workshops in embroidery, crochet and t-shirt and sign printing. Currently, over half of the children we serve supplement their income by selling their wares in local markets, funding their school fees and the purchase of medicine and food. Many of our students have formed their own batik collectives, and opened their own t-shirt and sign printing shops in their communities.

Our drama programs build on the traditional West African practice of social reform through public drama, as our students perform plays on child rights, HIV and AIDS awareness, and peaceful conflict resolution for their communities. Our dance and music workshops focus on traditional and contemporary styles, promoting inter-ethnic connections and cooperation. While incorporating utility and ritual, our dance and music workshops facilitate self-expression of personal experiences and hopes for the future. Our students have gone on to join professional drumming and dance troupes, work at professional recording studios, and have their original songs played on national radio stations.

We have been initiating and carrying out successful arts outreach and vocational training programs in West Africa for five years, and have a reputation of excellence and collaboration in the communities we serve. Below is a report on the first year of our most recently initiated arts program in the Northern township of Makeni, in the Bombali District of Sierra Leone, followed by an index of links to blogpost and video footage illustrating our work.

[Report: Arts Programs and Vocational Training for Street Children in Makeni, Sierra Leone](#)

Our goals for the first year of the Arts Education International program in Makeni, Sierra Leone included very particular, concrete goals in addition to more general goals for the community at large. Our objectives included creating a safe space for orphaned and abandoned children to engage in creative and enriching activities, connecting orphaned and abandoned

children with mentors in the arts, providing skills training and vocational workshops in the arts, and offering apprenticeship and intensive training opportunities for highly motivated students. Our larger goals for the community have included combating the isolation faced by orphaned and abandoned children in Makeni by empowering them socially and financially, offering children the opportunity to confront trauma on their own terms through the arts, fostering economic development in Makeni by promoting the practical arts and music industries, and facilitating reconciliation within the township of Makeni and the greater Sierra Leone *fambul dem*.<sup>1</sup>

We avoided many of the challenges faced during the implementation of prior programs by requiring a full proposal from Elizabeth Kamara,<sup>2</sup> the community leader requesting our services. In the proposal, Ms. Kamara outlined the extent of the community's intended cooperation and contribution to an AEI program. This included a perpetual donation of classroom space from Cankalay Primary School, and volunteer help with the supervision and evaluation of our programs from Ms. Kamara and Queen Mother Madam Fatmata Lamboi. Despite this unprecedented cooperation from the community, we encountered one issue that was very difficult to overcome. This challenge was the fact that many of the families in Makeni use the foster children they care for as laborers, and initially required some of the children to work during the first days of our arts camp. When this problem arose, we were happy to have the Queen Mother to intervene on ours and the children's behalf. The Queen Mother reasoned that the programming we were providing was a free service, and a service that is beneficial to the community as a development initiative. In this way, she was able to convince the foster parents to allow the children to participate in each class that was offered. Child labor and exploitation of foster children is an issue we have also dealt with extensively in Daru, and one of the unfortunate realities we hope to transform with our programming.

Our first year in Makeni began with a two-week immersive arts camp, that included five hours of daily instruction in batik fabric-dyeing, t-shirt and sign printing, singing, dance and drama. During the camp, five senior artistic instructors and their apprentices taught 204 orphaned, abandoned and foster children in Cankalay classrooms. This camp culminated in a community recital that was attended by approximately 300 community members. The final dance performance showcased an inter-tribal routine that enacted reconciliation between warring tribal factions. During the camp, 22 young women learned batik fabric-dyeing, an incredibly valuable skill in Sierra Leone. These women have since formed a batik collective and sell their products in the local market. They continue to hone their skills by participating in monthly batik workshops instructed by Mohamed Kamara. 30 young men were trained in stencil printing, and have since been hired to make signs and t-shirts professionally for local groups, including the Makeni Police Wives Association. Following the completion of the two-week camp, AEI has continuously offered twice-weekly classes in practical arts (embroidery, crochet, beadwork, t-shirt and sign printing), cultural dance, singing, and drama.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fambul Dem* is a Krio term that literally means "All Family," but is most often used to refer to the community or nation at large.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Kamara is the director of Young Shall Grow, Makeni.

Building on the traditional West African practice of social reform through public drama, our dramatic workshops provided an incredible opportunity for our students to voice their concerns for themselves and their community in a creative and fruitful manner. In this spirit, all AEI drama programs focus on child rights education, HIV and AIDS awareness, and peaceful conflict resolution. Two of the most notable plays, directed by AEI Senior Drama Instructor Shola Sesay, addressed the issue of child rights. The first play, titled “Child Labor in the City” was rehearsed by thirty children during the intensive arts camp and performed during the community recital. The play told a story that is all-too-common for foster children and children in Sierra Leone, that of child labor and exploitation. In the play, a mother toils on a small farm in the village, unable to send her two children to school. One day, the mother’s sister comes to visit from the city, and offers to take the children with her to Freetown and pay for their education. The mother is thrilled, thinking that her prayers have been answered, and agrees to send her children to the city with their Aunt. However, once the children arrive in Freetown they are forced to sell cold water for ten hours each day and never allowed to go to school. The Aunt uses the money she makes from exploiting the children to pay the school fees and buy the uniforms and supplies necessary to send her own son to school. Another play written collectively by the children of the AEI drama troupe in Makeni and titled “The Rights of a Child” addressed a similar issue. In this play, the children staged a protest declaring their rights as children: including the right to be educated, the right to be adequately fed and housed, and the right to not be used as a trader. The children bring their concerns to the local chiefs, who after much discussion outlaw child labor. The play ends with a celebration. By acting out the problems faced in Makeni and their hopes and dreams for the future, these children are actively transforming their communities. Over 800 community members in Makeni have watched the plays performed by the AEI drama troupe over the course of the year, bearing witness to the important lessons about the benefits of educating community youth, and the respect for child rights that the stories of the plays imbue. Furthermore, the children who compose and carry out these plays are impressing child rights as a renewed prioritization for their peers, so that child exploitation may not continue as a generational legacy.

As with our other initiatives in Sierra Leone, we have provided additional opportunities for private instruction and apprenticeships for highly motivated students. In addition to the students participating in batik and printing collectives, we identified a group of ten incredible AEI students who call themselves the “Future Planners.” The Future Planners were formed as a support group and arts collective for children orphaned by the civil war in 2005. After excelling in the first three months of AEI workshops, the Future Planners completed a six-month intensive training program with five senior artistic instructors. During the training program, each student focused on a specific discipline, and participated in ten teacher-training workshops. In July of this year, the Future Planners began teaching daily after-school arts programs as AEI stipend-supported student instructors. The Future Planners also participated in an apprenticeship in April 2011 at Sargenic Records, a Makeni-based recording studio. During the apprenticeship, the Future Planners learned valuable skills in song-writing, singing, and music production. The final product of the apprenticeship was an educational track written, performed, and produced by the

Future Planners titled “Song For The Orphans.” The song illustrates the particular problems faced by orphaned and street children in Makeni, and advises the community to be compassionate towards these children and offer their help.

Every child we serve has an incredible story to tell, but there are two children from our Makeni program whose stories we find particularly inspiring. Cosi Mansaray was only seven years old when his mother was killed before his eyes by rebel soldiers. After fleeing the insurgency, Cosi discovered that his father was killed at a rebel checkpoint two weeks later. Cosi spent the remaining two years of the war heroically fleeing rebel recruitment, and spent the eight years since exchanging his labor for food and shelter. During this time, Cosi’s only refuge was music and dance. He loved to sing, and learned Pop ‘N Lock (a style of hip hop dancing) from standing outside of a local bar and watching a television that played music videos. In 2005, Cosi met Susan Bangura, a young girl with a similarly tragic story. Susan’s home was attacked by rebels when she was only five years old, and her father was shot in front of her and her family. Susan and her ten-year-old brother were kidnapped by the rebels, where Susan was taken as a sex slave and her brother was forced to fight. Her brother was shot by ECOMOG forces during battle at the young age of 11, and Susan was left as the sole survivor of her family. When Susan and Cosi met, they began the Future Planners collective, telling their stories and teaching one another to dance, sing, and draw. Cosi and Susan both excelled in the AEI program in Makeni and completed intensive training with the rest of the Future Planners. Susan currently teaches crochet and beadwork to 25 younger orphaned children in Makeni, and makes her own batik to sell in the market. Cosi now teaches traditional dance, in addition to AEI’s first pop ‘n lock class to 15 younger orphaned children in Makeni. Susan and Cosi have both said that since joining the AEI family in October of 2010, they have enjoyed the happiest time in their lives. We are grateful to have been able to connect Cosi and Susan with the artistic mentors that have transformed their lives, and to have offered them their first opportunities for economic independence and social leadership.

### **Index of Links**

- Cosi’s Story and his first Pop ‘N Lock Class: <http://artseducationinternational.blogspot.com/2011/07/cosi-mansaray-look-how-far-hes-come.html>
- Video of Makeni Play “Child Labor in the City”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY7updHg-vU>
- Pictures from Makeni Play “The Rights of a Child”: <http://artseducationinternational.blogspot.com/2011/05/drama-workshops-in-makeni-may-2011.html>
- Future Planners Internship at Sargenic Records (with song): <http://artseducationinternational.blogspot.com/2011/04/future-planners-recording-at-sargenic.html>
- Registration for Future Planners After-School Program in Makeni: <http://artseducationinternational.blogspot.com/2011/07/registration-day-for-new-classes-in.html>