



Pa's Hat Foundation - The Liberia Project

PROPOSAL

COMMUNITY SERVED & PROBLEM ADDRESSED

The nature and extent of the need/problem

Two violent civil wars between 1989 - 1996 and 1999-2003 have left Liberia with a staggering economic situation and political instability. 85 % of the population is unemployed and over 80% live below the poverty line.. It is estimated that over 38,000 children over 10-40% were enlisted as child soldiers. Two decades of civil war followed by Ebola epidemic, have severely impacted on the capacity of the country to rebuild itself. Over 35 % Liberians never received an education and economic opportunities are severely impacted by widespread illiteracy (57% of the population) across the country, with the potential of causing increased violence and instability. Whilst, education is one of the crucial features of former soldiers regeneration, accessing education has proven difficult for many former child soldiers, as Liberia's educational infrastructure has been severely weakened by years of war.

There are approximately 38,000 former child soldiers in Liberia lacking high school diplomas and opportunities for employment and inclusion in society.

Although the war ended ten years ago, the effects of this long war lasting from 1989 until 2003 continue to impact Liberian citizens, their identity and pride as Liberians, and ability to make a meaningful life for themselves.

Cultural stigma from fellow Liberians, a dearth of opportunities, namely gainful employment, education including reading and writing skills, and arts education contributes to a lack of cultural awareness with which to counter negative identity and allow these men to become productive citizens and gain back respect in their communities.

Factors Contributing to the Problem or Conditions

Continued identification with the horrors of war, and poor self-image for Liberians are attributable to this lack of programs that would counter Liberia's negative cultural identity and self-image. The victims of war are many, especially children who themselves are guilty of committing horrible and terrifying acts. Former child combatants who, once out of the conflicts were rejected by their communities, were left to grapple with the realization of exactly what they had done and witnessed. Further, the Ebola crisis of 2014 helped to set back improvements that were underway. Liberia needs rebuilding and by helping to rehabilitate these young men so that they are men of agency and capabilities, the healing of Liberia will be that much further along.

Impact of the Need/Problem

The proven benefits of education, and gainful employment addresses a need for vocational and literacy programs, and opportunities for employment for the male former combatants. Liberia has a stunning lack of jobs and affordable education to serve these, in some cases, older men who since they were young were fighting. Cultural programs and arts education are also necessary to establish a sense of cultural expression. Identification with heritage are benefits that are unrealized in Liberian society. This is a contributing factor to continued identification with the ugliness and destruction represented by the war. If these young men have earning capacity and an education, their self worth and identity in their own society will be much improved, as will their own society's view of them in return. As will the world's view of Liberia.

Promising approaches for improved results

Transforming the image and establishing positive identification of Liberia's males through self-enrichment in their lives are the expected, improved results through an approach of investing in Liberia's identity.

Although many NGO's and programs are stationed in Liberia helping with post war and Ebola crisis repercussions, very few, if any are focused on the males impacted by the war, and in particular, the former male combatants. We believe that giving these men a boost in their self esteem by giving them opportunity to be seen as respectable men will cut down on poverty and crime.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND IMPLEMENTATION

Goals

The goal is not only to facilitate education and vocational training, but to actually help create and support small groupings of former male combatants in an incubator model

business enterprise of their choosing in their community. Within a 5 year period, of education support, on the job training with supervision and special expert master classes, the groups will be gifted their business. Until the 5 years are up, 10 percent of proceed of the business come back to Pa's Hat Foundation in order to begin new businesses around Liberia, run by small groups of male former combatants, and eventually other males. To be noted is the fact that this model employs not only the former combatants, but also the supervisors. In this particular case, 8 individuals will be gainfully employed and earning an income they can count on.

- Support traditional style education/ adult literacy and vocational training for each participant as necessary.
- Support a small co-op style business that will beget other small businesses run in the same way. They may be in different areas and different sorts of businesses.
- Collaborate with Liberian professionals as well as offer special training by additional guest teachers from around the world so that the business is professional and current.
- Produce a documentary film archiving the 5 year project in order to track and document and bring positive attention to the image of Liberia aiding in economic growth, cultural, and tourism. By proving deadly former combatants can be gainfully employed, educated and running their own businesses, the image on the whole of Liberia will be uplifted.
- Develop in the participants a civic mindedness so that a responsibility towards their own communities and country will be enforced and expected. The participants will be required to come up with ways to give back to their communities and become leaders and mentors.
- Liberia has a large rape culture, therefore Male/Female relations will be explored and discussed.
- Offer an additional arts education program to replenish what the former combatants missed out on in their childhood by offering artistic type workshops to enhance their lives.

Each of these steps is seen as an essential piece in creating a project that will outlast the initial phase.

Objectives

- In attempting to provide a "face-lift" for Liberia, fund and help organize and create small local businesses providing gainful employment for the former combatants. By witnessing former combatants engaged in prideful industrial growth will help us to see that all humans are capable of positivity.
- The ex-combatants of Liberia are now not all so young anymore, and there is some distance from combat years. It is my hope that we can together find a way to

understand how to reach and help energize and inspire a younger generation still traumatized and held back by their enforced combat, not only to educate and prevent such a thing from ever happening again, but to heal those who number in over 38,000 individuals by giving them a chance to thrive and therefore heal and become vital members of their community.

- Our endeavors should result in a sense of individual and national pride and accomplishment. The participant's participation will teach them different tools of expression and awareness of a bigger world of possibilities than what they would have thought was possible and certainly what was available to them.

PART I:

Summary of accomplishments:

In 2013 the creation of Pa's Hat Foundation and its 501(c)3 status.

In 2014 Pa's Hat Foundation Liberia, is registered In Liberia as an NGO (Non Governmental Organization).

The Fundraising goals of Pa's Hat Foundation is to enlist support from Americans and Europeans and possibly Liberians, monetarily and in kind, the proceeds from which will supplement funding for the multiple steps involved in implementing the goals of the Liberia Project.

2013 Co-founders Cori Thomas and Dion Graham go to Liberia on a 2 week recon mission. They engaged in drama workshops with youth in West Point and New Georgia. They spoke with members of the press introducing Pa's Hat Foundation as a presence. They met with President Ellen Sirleaf Johnson who offered encouragement and support for their wish to introduce arts workshops as a tool for healing and growth.

2014 Pa's Hat Foundation led by Cori Thomas, organized and partnered with Starkey Hearing Foundation a hearing mission in which over 500 deaf Liberians adult and children received free hearing aids. The remarkable mission was attended by the President and was widely covered by the Press.

Preliminary plans were set into action during a visit December 26 2016-January 4 2017 by Cori Thomas for a new project:

THE LIBERIA PROJECT

Cori interviewed and identified 5 young men from a pool of 25. She interviewed them each individually on film, and then conducted a round table style meeting (also filmed) at which they, with the encouragement of Cori Thomas, came up with an idea for a small business (A

Graphic Design/Printing store) to run in their community, a suburb of Monrovia called New Georgia. Their dreams and goals were discussed and the roles each might play in such a business. It was also determined that there is presently no such business in that area and so there is a good chance their idea for the business can flourish. Mostly, the 5 young men who were at first ashamed and embarrassed while speaking of their combatant experience, became animated and excited and inspired by the idea of owning a business that they had planned themselves.

3 supervisors, all college educated were identified. These three will be hands on with the young men helping them to daily run the business and making sure the organization is properly audited and mission is implemented. One supervisor, Emmanuel Nyamen is a professional accountant and book keeper with prior NGO experience. Jesse Goll is a social worker and will counsel the young men and act as a go-between them and community and schooling. Teddy Pewee has marketing and journalism experience and will help to document the process by constant video and photographic records, but also aid in ordering supplies and office work.

It is remarkable that since the completion of phase one in which the 5 initial participants were identified, 40 other former combatants of various ages, have shown up at Teddy Pewee's home asking to please be given jobs as well. Their names have been taken for further phases.

PA'S Hat Foundation current goals and fundraising plans:

Ensure all funding needs for the phases of the project are met through:

- *Presentation of documentary style fundraising videos will serve to provide explanation and share inspiration for The Liberia Project. It is our belief that if the public actually meets and hears the travails and dreams and wishes of those they are actually helping, the fundraising drives will be more successful.*
- *A crowd-sourcing campaign will be employed following the editing of a short video introducing our 5 participants: Sam (age 23), Thomas (age 19), Sems (age 38), Dolo (age 27), Varney (age 25)*
- *There are private fundraising plans underway: around the US friends of Pa's Hat will host small events designed to raise funds, such as a concert and an art show and other such events.*
- *Social Media presence such as Facebook and Twitter are being implemented as a venue for updates and for donations through the website.*
- ***Anticipated date: ASAP underway***

PART II:

LIBERIA PROJECT

PRESENT GOALS and ACTIONS:

Summary:

The second phase of the project, THE LIBERIA PROJECT presently underway involves:

Renting a building to house the store. One has been located that is on the main road and would be large enough to offer a study room for the young men to use for their homework as well as an office for the supervisors and a storage room for supplies.

Registering the 5 program participants in various literacy/educational programs tailored to their needs.

Cori's statement as Co-founder and President of the Board of The Pa's Hat Foundation:

My name is Cori Thomas and I am the American born daughter of the late former Liberian Ambassador David M. Thomas from Liberia, West Africa. My father was the Liberian Ambassador to many International posts and the UN until 1980 when the government he represented was overthrown by a violent Coup d'etat. The Republic of Liberia suffered a horrible war that lasted in effect from 1989 until 2003. For me, the unrest began in 1980 when I witnessed close family friends assassinated on TV, and lost many friends and family. Although I was living in the US, my own quality of life and self-confidence was shaken. The victims of war are many, the damage is widespread, but none are so seriously damaged as many of the children who themselves are guilty of committing horrible and terrifying acts.

In 2000, at age 83, after a twenty year absence from his place of birth, my Dad insisted I accompany him to Liberia because he thought he would not outlive the war. While there, I was nearly shot by a child soldier who pointed an automatic weapon at my head. Coming so close to death caused me to evaluate and re-focus my life. I realized that up to that point I had not actually done anything worthy of self-pride, and more importantly, that I had not done anything to make a difference in the world. Since then, my work has flourished. I have had quite a few plays produced, I have won a few awards and I can say that first hand I understand how a traumatic experience can help to actually focus and center you. In a strange way, I credit that child soldier with my success. I wanted to give something back to others like him who did not point an automatic weapon at my head by choice.

When I recently conducted the round table with the 5 former combatants. They

shared their dismay and shame at their actions. I wanted to try to encourage them and take some of their shame away. It occurred to me and I told them each that they are actually so very brave for having endured what they did and to be sitting here in front of me now ready and willing to be further educated and in a position to own and run their own business. If I could bottle and sell the way they sat up in front of me and smiled, I would be a rich woman. In any case, it was a gift I will never forget to see them gain back a pinch of self –pride at the concept of owning something. To know that my belief in them can help them, gives me a sense of responsibility I do not and will not take lightly.

I feel that where ugliness and misunderstanding exists, accomplishment which is seeing the results of your efforts aimed at a specific task can help to put you in control of your life again.

In brief, it is my mission to help Liberia, West Africa heal from the war and the Ebola crisis. I myself suffered emotionally from that very brief entanglement with near death, so I can only imagine at the depths of despair for former child combatants who, once out of the conflicts, and rejected by their communities, are now left to grapple with the realization of exactly what they have done and witnessed. Many psychology books could be written about what the impact this self-realization means for these individuals and how it manifests itself. I am not proposing a psychology workshop but rather an opportunity to give these maligned men an introduction to what it is to live lives of agency and accomplishment.

Cori Thomas

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