



Sierra Leone Educational Partnership Visits College

By: Darlene Henderson

In December of 2018, I traveled with fellow board member, Gillian Houghton, on behalf of the Sierra Leone Educational Partnership (SLEP) to Sierra Leone in West Africa.

We visited the Canadian College of Modern Technology (CCMT), a college founded by Muckson Sesay, a member of our Winnipeg congregation. CCMT is located in Mile 91, which is 91 miles from the capital city of Freetown.

Muckson immigrated to Canada in 2005 and had a dream to start a college in his native country. He had seen computer classes being taught without even one computer available and saw there was a definite need for hands-on technology. He wanted to harness the opportunities he saw available in the western world to help his people. What started very small, with the purchase of a piece of land in a rural area, has grown into an accredited college on lovely grounds, with multiple buildings and ongoing construction, and over 400 students.

Muckson is a visionary and what he has done is amazing. He has worked tirelessly, with great self-sacrifice and determination, to see

In Sierra Leone: SLEP board members Gillian Houghton (left) and Darlene Henderson (right) with Muckson Sesay.

his dream come to fruition. Along the way, he started to receive some financial help and advice from a local Manitoba philanthropist, Mr. Wesley Penner, who shared his vision. As the college needs grew, it was realized that if charitable status could be obtained, more funds could be donated. Our pastor, Alan Redmond, aware of Muckson's efforts and struggles, saw the need for a team to help support Muckson, and a board was established and the lengthy application process for charitable status began.

SLEP became a registered charity in November of 2017 with a mandate to provide scholarships to students with proven financial need and academic qualifications. With our first major donation, we were finally in a position to start awarding scholarships. Advertisements in Sierra Leone and word of mouth brought in many applications, and it was a difficult task to select that first round of recipients. As additional funds became available, we were able to select others, and to date have awarded 265 scholarships. Each scholarship is for one year at CCMT, and includes tuition fees, textbooks, laptop, accommodation and meals, and the possibility of renewal based on academic standing and available funds.



Working in the College Kitchen.

As a new charity, part of the reason for our visit was due diligence for Canada Revenue Agency. It was also an opportunity to represent the SLEP board to the college and be a part of the official scholarship awards ceremony for the latest recipients. We also wanted to learn more about the college, the students, their country, and the issues they deal with.

That first day we arrived at the college was very moving. As we drove in, students and staff lined the roads waving, eagerly awaiting our arrival. I had seen photos of the college and heard much about it, but to actually be there was something else. There was an assembly with introductions, and students performed welcome dances, songs and skits for us. We were thanked many times for coming, and scholarship recipients expressed their gratitude for the opportunity they were given. They were in disbelief that we came all the way from Canada to see them. Selecting scholarship recipients is a task that weighs heavily on us. Most of the life stories and desperate situations that are submitted with applications are heart wrenching, and to now put faces to these names was so meaningful.

Each day there was filled from morning to night with activities. We stayed in a basic apartment a short distance from the college, but still on the campus grounds. Students, some shyly and some quite boldly, would often come to chat. We went to informal breakfast gatherings with staff and students, and visited with as many as we could. We made every effort to be accessible and engage with the students, from walking the grounds, to hanging out in the campus canteen in the evenings with them, to dancing with them (which they thought was very cool!) They especially liked taking pictures with us, and the words "snap me, snap me" were heard over and over. It was often amusing, as there was a bit of a frenzy as they clustered to get close to us, and more and more people piled into the photo.

After our first breakfast visit, we were curious to see the kitchen, and ventured around the corner. I was expecting to see some sort of commercial set up, but instead these hard-working women were bent over pots on fires and coals on the ground, cooking in their traditional African fashion. There were no stoves, no mixers, no appliances. We were incredulous at the volume of meals they were able to provide. Typical student meals were rice with cassava leaves or other stewed mixtures. Breakfast sandwiches were considered special, extra-large buns with egg or egg and meat mixtures, served with tea. To be regularly fed is indeed a blessing to the students, many who would otherwise be going hungry.

On the scholarship ceremony day, the ladies in the kitchen were making cake as a treat, and we walked in to see them taking turns pounding sugar with a large stick and then sifting it to make powdered sugar. (We gave it a try - it's hard work!) All the while working, there were plenty of smiles, good natured bantering, singing and sometimes dancing. The cake ingredients were mixed in large tubs that they later carried on their heads

and took to the nearby village bakery (a mud brick building with a wood fired oven). A fee is paid to bake items. We were told that only the very rich would have an oven. (Based on our feedback, there are plans to construct an improved kitchen and introduce appropriate items as finances allow.)

On a later visit to the kitchen, the ladies presented Gillian and I with gifts of colourful African pants, necklace and earrings to thank us. These women have little means, and this was certainly unexpected and touching. They said that it was because of us (the scholarship program), that they had jobs and wanted to express their appreciation. The first day we saw the lady who cleaned the floors of the apartment we stayed in, she also smilingly came to thank us that we gave her a job.

The scholarship presentation ceremony day was a special occasion, with some student families and local dignitaries attending. The event was also covered by radio and television crews, and Gillian and I were interviewed by a prominent television journalist. This was great publicity for the college, and the Canadian guests sparked much interest. Muckson had also arranged for a photographer/videographer to cover our visit, and he followed us around each day. That took some getting used to, but his coverage and documentary will help give further credence to CCMT.

We brought Canadian souvenir items with us to give away as gifts, and many smaller items that were given away in draws to the students after the ceremony. This was very exciting for them, as each came up to choose something from the table - socks, headbands - everyone wanted something with 'Canada' on it. We had taken several hundred Canadian flag lapel pins, but most wanted to use them as earrings, and were very happy if they got two. (Luckily we brought so many; there are Canadian pins and flags now all over the area!)



While we apparently made an impact at the college and with the students, and they were so thankful to us, they clearly made an impact on us, and we are so thankful for them and for what we learned.

I truly feel I left a part of me there. It is a very different world, and the experiences and impressions will remain carved in my heart. My passion for what the Sierra Leone Educational Partnership is doing, and pride in the Canadian College of Modern Technology and what Muckson has accomplished, are even stronger. I am grateful to have had even a small part in this.

Together as a board, we are so thankful for God's blessing in these endeavours, and excited for future growth. To give the gift of education can be life changing, growing the person, helping their family and ultimately their country.

SLEP Scholarship Presentations

We hosted a gathering with female scholarship recipients one afternoon, treating them with soft drinks bought locally, and fancy biscuits and chocolates from Canada, and another gift raffle. They were delighted with the special attention. This is still a very male dominated society, where it is still common for men to have more than one wife. Some of the girls would have been forced into arranged marriages if they had not been able to attend college.

In addition to our time at the college, we also had the opportunity for some interesting side trips. These included a visit to the local orphanage (where some of the scholarship students are from) and an audience with the village Chief. Often we were asked to give impromptu speeches at our visits. We had a tour of Muckson's brother's farm and the family village. We were welcomed into homes to see traditional ways of life, and met village hunters walking through the jungle with the day's kill. We were not in a tourist area, and when venturing out, locals were curious to see us and the children would run to greet us, wanting to hold our hand and touch our skin, and with wide smiles would yell out "*snap me, snap me*".

A visit to a nearby traditional market day was also a unique experience. We could hardly open the vehicle door against the crush of young children anxiously trying to sell their wares to us. A walk through the crowded market engaged every sense. Everything you could possibly imagine is being sold, laid out at stalls or piled on their heads, and the local medicine man touts his potions.

Muckson is a hometown hero in Mile 91, and has become a local celebrity in the area. His renown enabled us to see and do things that the average person would not have been able to do. He has never forgotten his humble beginnings, and all his work is to give back to his country and to make a difference.

Our week concluded with two special events: a holiday dance party for staff and students, and an afternoon at a beach near Freetown.