

# MUSTAPHA\* (SIERRA LEONE)

*“I couldn’t imagine being here today in this position without her.”*

See [Navaeh’s Refugee Learner Narrative for another perspective and additional information on Sierra Leone](#).

## Life before Canada

### Birthplace and Family

*Bonjour, Kushe, Hello.* My name is Mustapha. I was born May 13, 1991, in Sierra Leone, in the small town of Bumbuna in the Tonkolili District<sup>1</sup> in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone. For a while, before I came to Canada, I lived in the capital city—named Freetown, relatively close to Bumbuna and still in Sierra Leone. I am not sure of what cultural group I belong to. My family and I spoke French at home and also a form of broken English, which is called Krio (also known as Kriol).

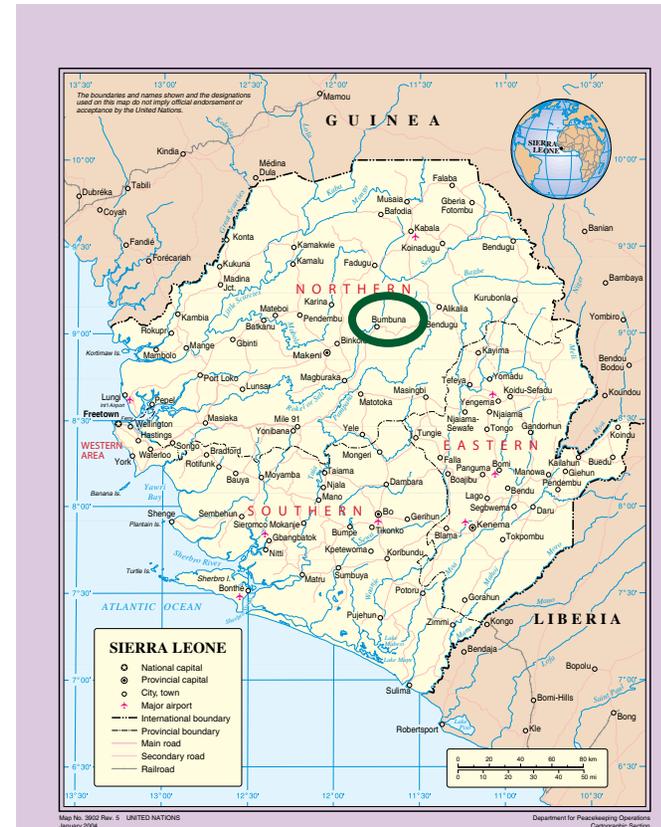
I have a very, very big family, which is spread out through Africa and all over the United States. My mom’s brother’s family, and my sister’s family, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, and cousins and their respective families, family like that, are

all spread out. In my immediate family, we are at least 20—which include my mother and father, 11 of their children, and my nieces and nephews and my brothers’ and sisters spouses’. I have five brothers and five sisters. I had a good relationship with my family. I was the sixth child to be born, so I have younger brothers and sisters.

In Sierra Leone, my dad was in the army fighting for the country. My mom was in sales at the local market—she had her own stall. She sold ginger, gingerbread, cakes, popcorn, ice cream, sweet things, and cultural foods, like benni (Sierra Leonean word for sesame). Benni are like little seeds that you put seasoning on, such as salt or pepper and then mix it up and grind it up, and then use on rice. I was always at the market—helping my mother. I didn’t have a say in it, it was expected of me. I had to help and I didn’t have a choice. My job was to wipe down the counter and keep it clean, as there were always fresh batches of things coming up, and making sure the stall was clean. I was about seven years old when I started helping her. I did that for about two years at least. I didn’t have time to eat the ice cream—I had to make sales.

\* To protect the participant’s privacy, pseudonyms have been used in this narrative.

1 The people of Tonkolili District in Northern Sierra Leone are mostly from the Temne ethnic group. Other ethnic groups in Northern Sierra Leone with significant population are the Limba, Kuranko, Mandingo, Loko, Fula, and Yalunka. The majority of the population is Muslim with Christianity being the second largest religious group in the region, followed by traditional African religion.



© United Nations/Department for Peacekeeping Operations, Cartographic Section. Map No. 3902 Rev. 5. January 2004. Map of Sierra Leone. CC License. <[www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/sierrale.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/sierrale.pdf)>.

The village had a small population compared to other villages nearby and there were not a lot of buildings around. All the homes were little houses. The houses were made of bricks and sand, all handmade, not made with machines. There was always a lot of wind, a lot of breezes.

At night there is not a lot of light—except when the moon is shining.

I listened to the birds and the animals. Kids were running around all day, all night, riding their bikes and motorbikes, but the motorbikes didn't go very fast. There were no cars. We would just run around and had nothing to worry about—it was very free. As soon as there was no light, I would see so many stars.

In Bumbuna, there were some people who were wealthy and lived in big houses, just like anywhere else. We all can't be like that, wealthy. The guy who has everything, he's obviously going to have whatever he wants. His house is going to be fancier than anyone else's house. Usually, as kids we would go and peek through the curtains of the rich peoples' houses to see if there was a TV show we could see. We would stand there and watch. If the owners changed the channel, we would leave.

Children in Bumbuna were running around and enjoying themselves all the time. We just had to watch out for animals that could make us sick, like snakes. There was one really bad one I still recall, but can't remember the name. It was green and not too big, but I didn't want to get in its way. I was always scared of it. There were big bugs like, scorpions and spiders. Snakes are number one though.

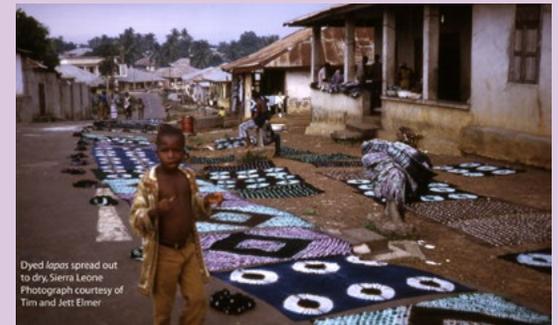
Also, depending on where I went there were tigers or lions. For example if I went hunting, away from the village, then it was possible to see those animals. They didn't generally come around the village as they knew we're around, and they knew we would take action if we saw them. So they generally stayed away so they weren't butchered.

There were many things I liked about living in Bumbuna. But especially the way people carried themselves and the way people knew that we weren't living up to standards. And just the culture, because everything that happens happens for a reason, we're living in Africa. People do not have to worry about paying any bills—just freedom. There's nothing you have to pay for, you just live—you grow your own food, you cook when you want to eat, you go to get water, you take a shower when you need to take a shower with the water you have. When there is no more water—you get some more. When I was younger, my mom would send my brother to get water. I was about five when I had to start getting water. I had to go miles to get water for drinking and for washing. But life there was still easier—you didn't have to worry about bills, etc. We just did what we're supposed to do there to survive. It wasn't as complicated as living here.

My mother used the money she made selling in the market to buy more things that she could sell, and to buy some clothes. There was so much we could make ourselves, but at some point we needed to buy some things. Mother also used some of the money for school uniforms and books in order for the children to be able to attend school. I could choose to pay for lunch there or I could choose to come home for lunch. People in Bumbuna would grow their own food, and build their own houses. I was very happy living in my community.



© Tim Elmer. Bumbuna Village, Circa 1974. Used with permission. All rights reserved.



© Tim Elmer. Dyed Lapas spread out to dry, Sierra Leone circa 1974. Used with permission. All rights reserved.



© Imagine Canada. February 26, 2008. Plan Canada. Portrait of girls in window at Harford Secondary School for girls in Moyamba, Sierra Leone. School provides education for refugee and displaced girls. <[www.flickr.com/photos/imaginecanada/5684755913](http://www.flickr.com/photos/imaginecanada/5684755913)>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

# SIERRA LEONE

## A Brief History

Today Sierra Leone is a nation with a population of about six million people. At least 2,500 years ago, its lands became inhabited by indigenous African peoples and over time populated by successive movements of peoples from other parts of Africa.

After European exploration, Sierra Leone became a centre of the Atlantic slave trade, and hundreds of thousands of Africans were transported from the interior to the Americas from there. Later, it became a site for the repatriation of former slaves during the abolitionist movement. The capital, Freetown, in 1792, was founded as a colony for freed slaves who had fought on the British side during the American Revolutionary War. About 1,200 Black Loyalists were resettled from Nova Scotia on March 11, 1792. In 1808, Freetown became a British colony. It gained independence in 1961 after a long period of colonization by the British.

Sierra Leone has played a significant part in modern African political liberty and nationalism. However, from 1961 until the start of the civil war in 1991, political instability was common with several coups and regime changes.

## Civil War

The brutal civil war that was going on in neighbouring Liberia played a critical role in the outbreak of civil war in Sierra Leone. Charles Taylor, the leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia at the time, has been charged with helping form the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under the command of former Sierra Leonean army

corporal, Foday Saybana Sankoh. The prolonged and brutal civil war that followed in 1991 led to a substantial portion of Sierra Leone's peoples being displaced. By the end of 1999, it was estimated that 460,000 people were forced to leave the country, including 371,000 in Guinea and 96,000 in Liberia. An additional 500,000 were internally displaced. In November 1999, Sierra Leone began the long road back to stability and some form of normalcy, after the signing of the Lome Peace agreement in July 1999 and the deployment of a peacekeeping force, UNAMSIL.

However, conflict continued in several areas of the country in 2001. But the demobilization and disarmament process of RUF fighters was able to proceed, and eventually secured. By January 2002, the war was officially declared to be over and the entire country was secured. This allowed for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in May of 2002.

## Refugees and Repatriation

Despite the difficult and unsecure environment in Sierra Leone, refugees began returning as early as 2000. Over 40,000 returned, largely in response to violence in Guinea, even though areas of the country were still controlled by the rebels. As the country stabilized, UNHCR began to facilitate repatriation. From 2001 through June 2004, when formal repatriation ended, about 280,000 refugees had returned home. Many of the refugees and returnees had special

needs and included thousands of people such as former child soldiers, orphans, amputees, and victims of sexual abuse.

Refugees faced huge obstacles and severe challenges in resettling and integrating. Sierra Leone had been badly damaged with an estimated 300,000 homes and 80% of all schools having been destroyed. In addition, Sierra Leone hosted over 65,000 Liberian refugees, who had been driven out by conflict in the neighbouring country.

## Reference

Claudena Skran (2012). A catalyst and a bridge: An evaluation of UNHCR's community empowerment projects in Sierra Leone. UNHCR. <[www.unhcr.org/4f27bb689.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4f27bb689.html)>.



© David Turnley/UNICEF Italia. June 18, 2010. The moment of choosing teams as if it were the World Championship. Certainly, the team that gets David Beckham will have some chance of winning the game. Beckham, a Great Britain UNICEF Ambassador, played an unplanned match in Aberdeen, a suburb of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. CC License. <[www.flickr.com/photos/unicefitalia/4710948213/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/unicefitalia/4710948213/)>.

## Schooling in Bumbuna

I first went to school at about five years of age, when I was very young. We were still living in Bumbuna, Sierra Leone. I went to school for about two to three years. The school was small—just a one-storey building. I don't remember how many classrooms were in the building, but there were about 40 students in a classroom. Each classroom had a blackboard, crayons, long tables, and a lot of chairs. Many tables would have about 40 kids sitting at them. The boys and girls were mixed together.

We always had the same teacher; teachers didn't change for different subjects. We went to school for a half day, morning or afternoon, we could choose. I had to help my mom in the morning and then went to school from noon until about 5:00 p.m. We attended school about four days a week but, they would be spread out, depending on what classroom activities were being done. I don't remember what the school months were. I didn't go to school after two to three years because the rebels took over and started making demands and scaring everyone. It became dangerous to go to school.

French was used to teach in the school. I liked school and looked forward to going to school every day. My favourite subjects were math, art (drawing), and reading. The only difficulty I experienced was being the age I was—some kids were older, and they'd bully me and get under my skin. I'd come home and talk to my mom, and she told me to "act like a man." So, I did that and told the guy, "Hey, don't push me," or "I didn't do anything wrong, you have no reason to push me." I just told him, "There's no point in your acting this way towards me, as I didn't do anything. But then I can also push you back."

## Civil War

The war/conflicts affected me and my family a lot. Everything was going great—I had started school and I was looking forward to going to school more and getting more education and then the rebels came down on our house. It affected all of my family. My mom had her stall at the market and my dad had a good job with the government, but that all changed when the rebels came. When that happened, we had no other solution but to leave Bumbuna. You can't just grab a stick or a gun and fight. If you stay, you're going to die. But if you leave, you'll have a chance, and my family chose to leave and try to find somewhere that wasn't as dangerous.

We travelled and left Sierra Leone. We left Freetown and headed north. We stopped to sleep for a bit, and kept going. If we stopped, they would catch up with us. For at least one year we were on the move. I was still pretty young—about nine or so. Mom had me on her shoulders. We split up—my two brothers and my two sisters came with my mom and me. My dad went with the others. There was a plan to meet somewhere, but I don't recall where, and we did eventually meet. Following that year of moving about, we ended up in a refugee camp in another country, because after all that happened, we were basically refugees. We went to the farthest camp away from Bumbuna for protection. All our travelling was on foot. I don't remember where that camp was

located. Life during that time was hectic. I tried to sleep, but I just couldn't sleep because I knew what was going on. I was young and didn't know what to think of it. All I could do was just let my mom take care of me and hope for the best for me and my family. I was very afraid. It felt like there was nothing we could do about our situation. Just one year before we were fine, and then out of nowhere all this happened to us.

Bumbuna is one of the poorest communities in the country. Most young adults are out of work and there is a higher than average child and maternal mortality rate compared to the rest of the country. Children walk everyday for several miles to attend school.

### Reference

<[www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/?p=1630](http://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/?p=1630)>



© Silke v. Brockhausen/UN Photo. March 26, 2014. Children at a school supported by the World Food Programme run towards UN cars near Koindu, Sierra Leone. CC License. <<http://sl.one.un.org/2014/03/26/feature-drawing-down-the-end-of-un-peace-operations-in-sierra-leone/>>.

I felt safer once we were in the refugee camp. There wasn't a lot of food, but there was enough water for people to take showers, and just enough food when you needed it. They'd give us a bag of rice, barely a few cups of rice and we'd have to live on that for a while, until it was finished, and then ask for more in a food line. We had to travel not too far to get firewood. It was relatively safe as they had people protecting the camp all around it. I didn't go to school during that time. I do not have any good memories of that time. I don't have many other memories—the way things happened is what I remember. I remember I travelled often on my mom's shoulders.



© BBC News. February 15, 2001. Progress in Guinea refugees' plight. Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in camps near Guinea's borders, especially Parrot's Beak area near the border of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. The map shows three possible safety corridors being planned by UNHCR and the three nations that would allow for the "safe passage" of refugees from affected camps in Guinea to Sierra Leone or other parts of Guinea. CC License. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1171872.stm>>.

The whole family was together at that point. My dad also came to the camp, but he was still fighting for freedom and doing his job up until we met again. One day on his way to the camp, something bad happened to the airplane he was flying in. The rebels shot it down. When it was all said and done, after the shooting, they were able to land the plane, but not everything in the plane was in good shape. They didn't have brakes, and so they landed pretty hard. As they were landing, they hit the ground too quickly and too hard and skidded.

In the last moments before his passing, my mom called to me, and because I didn't want to face what was going on, I didn't respond. I didn't want to have that memory with me for life. But my mom called me again and told me that my dad wanted to say something to me. I didn't want to go into the room to listen to him or try to listen to him and hear his last words to me. But, I finally went to him and then he whispered some words. I couldn't really understand what he was trying to say to me, so I just watched him. He passed away right in front of me. After, I just ran away and sat outside. There was nothing we or I could do, because we had no money for the doctors to even look at him, or for the doctors to even think about looking at him. We could all see how much he was hurting and how much he needed help. But the refugee camp could not help him in that way, because that's not what they were there to do. So in order for them to give him a hand, or try to save his life, we needed money for medical



© Michael Kamber/UNICEF. May 18, 2010. Guinea, 2009: A girl attends class in an under-equipped school in the eastern city of Kindia. Primary school enrolment/attendance rates, currently at 51 percent, are falling, and adult literacy stands at 30 percent. Poverty is widespread, with over 70 percent of the population living on less than US \$1.25 a day. Deteriorating public health systems and political unrest are also contributing to the resurgence of preventable diseases, including measles and polio. CC License. <[www.flickr.com/photos/unicef/4725453962/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/unicef/4725453962/)>.

treatment, and we didn't have any of that. We lost everything. We lost him, because there was nothing else we could do.

## Immigration to Canada

Just before I came to Canada, we were in the refugee camp north of Sierra Leone, and my father had died. There was me, my older brother, my twin sisters, my youngest brother—that's five of us and my mom—so that was six of us. So there were six others left behind. The others went back to Sierra Leone after everything calmed down. Most of

## Sierra Leonean Refugees in Guinea: Life Harsh

During the height of the civil war in Sierra Leone, as many as 2 million of the country's 6 million people were displaced. Some 490,000 of the displaced people fled south to Liberia or north to Guinea. By 2001, an estimated 340,000 Sierra Leoneans were living in camps in Guinea.

The camps on the border with Sierra Leone did not bring peace, nor were they safe. In 2001, most of the refugees had to be relocated to new camps because of cross-border fighting and rebel incursions from Sierra Leone and Liberia. At that time, most of the larger refugee camps were situated near the border and the intense fighting endangered the lives of the people in the camps. The fighting also led to strong resentment, anger, and harassment by Guinean civilians against the refugees in camps as they were seen to be harbouring rebels, militia, and army personnel. In some cases, the Guinea local people are extremely poor and they resent that the refugees are given food and medicine by the aid organizations. Some refugees reported attacks on camps and killings by local Guineans.

### References

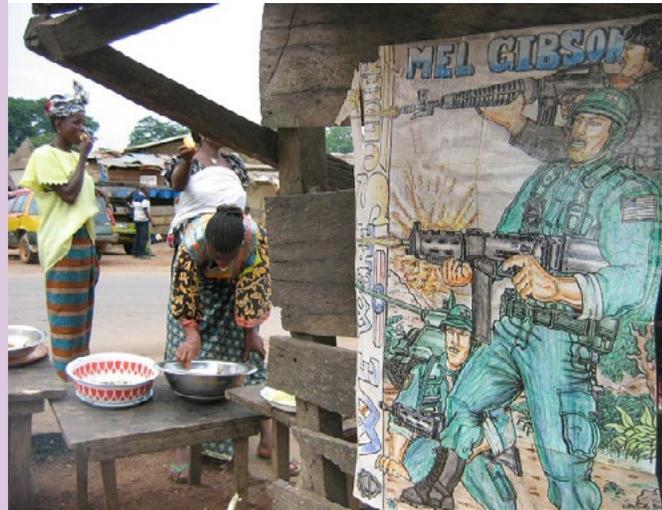
UNHCR (2008). Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea advised on end of their status <[www.unhcr.org/4890898c4.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4890898c4.html)>.

Rainer Lang, (2001). Suffering: A Harsh Daily Reality in Guinea Refugee Camps. UMCOR <<http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/emergency/harshdailyreality.cfm>>. Accessed 2013.

them have passed away. Two brothers and one sister passed away. There's only about three of them left. They stayed behind.

I didn't know anything about Canada—I had heard about the United States, but nothing about Canada. We were told we were going somewhere—to the States. I thought that was awesome. I had heard about the States and thought that would be a good place to live. That's what my mom had told me. I have an uncle who lives in Canada, and we also had another uncle who lives in London (England), so we thought we were going to go there.

My mother wanted to go to where there was family and my dad's brother, my uncle, lived in Winnipeg. That uncle, when he found us by searching for our names, sponsored us. He could only sponsor so many people; that's all he could afford to do.



© IRIN. 2005. Guinea: Ethnic tensions and weapon trafficking threaten the stability of the fragile forest region. CC License.

I was happy to come to Canada. I was just happy to get out of the refugee camp and the things that were happening at that time and in that place.

I was 11 years old at the time and I remember thinking of becoming an electrician or a radio host or something like that. When we played, we listened to the radio because there was no TV.

## Starting a New Life in Canada

I was 12 years old by the time we landed in Canada. I had my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday before we left the refugee camp. My dad's brother, my uncle, helped us settle. He met us at the airport, with his daughters, his son, and his wife—his whole family. I had never met him before. I think he had been in Winnipeg for 29 years. He came to Winnipeg when he was young—just like me.

My first memories of Winnipeg and Canada are lots of lights and lots of cold. I think we arrived in November or December. It was cold and windy, and I wasn't prepared for that kind of weather. My uncle turned on the car heater, and he took us home. The next day, we got winter jackets and boots. That is still what I don't like about Winnipeg/Canada. I don't like the cold, I don't like the winter—that's about it.

I also remember it was white at Christmas. There were even more lights at Christmas. My family and I lived in my uncle's house for about a year, until we found our own place, which was an apartment. We lived in that apartment for about another year, and then moved out. We moved to a lot of places—at least six moves. We moved for a lot of reasons (because we're too noisy and the neighbours complained, the TV's too loud, too expensive, can't

afford it, the neighbours smoke and I didn't want to be around that). We are now living in a condo and we finally feel settled; we rent the condo, we haven't bought it yet. I'm now living with my mom and two younger sisters (twins), and my little brother in our condo. My older brother has moved out, and he's still living in Winnipeg but in his own apartment, which is very close nearby.

I didn't have to worry about anything happening, like us being attacked—nothing to worry about in those terms. I felt safe.

At first we had difficulty adjusting to the Canadian culture and the way things are done: the way people talk, how they dress, how they act, the different characters, and different ways that people look at the world. Everything was pretty much different... everything. I didn't know what to wear, as I had just moved here. I wasn't used to the temperatures, so I was always trying to keep warm and protect my body by wearing a sweater and jacket. I saw a kid who was just wearing a shirt, when I thought it was pretty cold! But I guess it was cold for me, but not to him! But, I just wasn't used to the temperatures yet, and I don't know if I can ever get used to them.

The move to Canada affected our family life because the culture in Canada is so different—the weather was different, the food was different. Fortunately, my uncle and his kids helped me adjust. His wife was also a big part of it—they helped step by step. One can't tell someone new to a culture everything about it at once. Each day he would tell us something new about Canada. We watched TV and picked up some things, and went from there.

We had to spend more time cooking and learning how to shop and what to buy at the grocery store. When you buy something, but you don't know what it is and you've never seen it before, if you don't like it, you can't just return it, because you've taken a bite out of it. Simply going to a fast food restaurant was new to us. My uncle took us and we didn't know what to order, but he said that we would soon know. At first my uncle would order for all of us at McDonald's and choose things he thought we would like or what his kids liked. Later, when he knew what we liked, he ordered those things, and then we started ordering our own food. This was just one example of different ways to do things in the community and in Canadian culture. In Sierra Leone, we never had a drive-through and we never bought food ready to be eaten.

We started the practice of ordering pizza on Fridays. At first, I didn't know what pizza was. It was something I had to get used to and learn how to eat. My uncle's son showed me how to hold it correctly. I couldn't even hold a slice of pizza right but he was doing it perfectly! My favourite pizzas are now pepperoni and meat lovers'.



© Kanelstein, E./UNHCR. 2004. A returnee child on his way back to Sierra Leone. On July 21st, during a torrential rainstorm, the final UNHCR convoy from Liberia crossed over the Mano River bridge into Sierra Leone carrying 286 returnees. This convoy included the last of some 280,000 refugees returning home after Sierra Leone's brutal ten-year civil war which ended in 2000. UNHCR provided returnees with food rations, and various non-food items, including jerry cans, blankets, sleeping mats, soap and agricultural tools in order to help them establish their new lives in communities of origin. <[www.forcedmigration.org/photography-directory/a-returnee-child-on-his-way-back-to-sierra-leone/view](http://www.forcedmigration.org/photography-directory/a-returnee-child-on-his-way-back-to-sierra-leone/view)>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

In the beginning, it was very hard for me to make friends—very hard. One of my uncle's children was around my age (the others were older) and he showed me how to play video games and how to use the computer. So we spent time together. But my cousin only speaks English and not French—so there were a lot of difficulties and errors in speaking. I would try to talk to him but not know what to say, so sometimes I just had to point to things.



**Dr. Francis Amara** was born in Sierra Leone, but left in the 1970s before hostilities began to study abroad. He studied in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Russia before immigrating to Canada to do post-doctoral work. Today he is an assistant professor of biochemistry and medical genetics at the University of Manitoba.

Dr. Amara has also been active in supporting refugees and co-founded the Sierra Leone Refugee Resettlement Inc. which has been instrumental in supporting refugees from Sierra Leone, and providing after-school and summer youth programming for children of refugee and newcomer backgrounds.

Dr. Amara is passionate about medicine and science and he loves to share that passion with youth. In collaboration with the local Aboriginal community he founded the Inner City Science Laboratory, in which youth explore and learn about medicine. He also founded the Head Start Aboriginal Biomedical Youth Program and the Biomedical Youth Summer Camp. The camp, which started in 2006 with 15 youth participants, has now grown to accommodate 220 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, including newcomer children.

See Francis Amara's video on TEDxManitoba: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xa87Rm\\_tm4I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xa87Rm_tm4I)>.

© University of Manitoba. Spring 2009. Inner City Science Centre Brings Groups Together. CC License. <[http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/medicine/units/community\\_health\\_sciences/departamental\\_units/biomedical/news.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/medicine/units/community_health_sciences/departamental_units/biomedical/news.html)>.

I felt a bit like a “fish out of water,” as everything was so different. It’s a huge adjustment, but I think it was a good experience now when I think about where we came from and what we have now accomplished. I definitely experienced growing pains at first, but I can’t really think about what has happened in the past. I mean, I can think about it—but how long am I going to think about? The best thing my family and I try to do is to make sure that we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about what has taken place, because we can’t change it. We have to leave it up to God to answer for us.

We were lucky that our health has been fine. We had to see a doctor regularly to make sure everything was fine, but we are healthy. We are now able to sleep better and eat more, because the fighting is not going on around us anymore.

### *School Experiences in Canada*

The first school I attended in Canada was an elementary/middle years school. I was homeschooled for a while. It took a long time for me to get into the system—at least a year—as I didn’t have a permanent address. My first school was a Kindergarten to Grade 9 school in south-east Winnipeg—I was placed in Grade 6. I was the biggest kid in Grade 6. When I moved to Winnipeg, I was average or even small, but then I started eating and got bigger. My uncle’s wife cooks really good food, and so does my mom. Everything they cook is really good.

There was a big gap from the school I went to in Freetown—it was very, very difficult to fit in. The terms the teacher used were not terms my teacher had used and not those I was familiar with. The teachers had a different style of teaching. The teaching was in English, but different English. When I was homeschooled my parents spoke English all the time with me to help me recognize different English terms and slang. So I had some broken English when I came into the school. It was Krio a (Creole) language. Krio is English, but then it isn’t Canadian English.

Although I was placed with other students in the school, I did have after-school classes to help me pick up on what I missed, or what I didn’t catch in class. I felt comfortable with the teacher. Obviously, different teachers have different ways of getting the message out. I stayed at that school until Grade 9.

One of the things that helped was that the teacher would just spend more time with me, if I didn’t understand something or looked like I didn’t understand. She would also repeat her instructions, as I was the new student in the classroom. My teachers were all quite helpful. I think that the programming that the school provided at that time met my needs, but could be improved a little more with what happened. However, I did complete high school and finished my studies at the nearby high school.

High school was probably the best thing that happened to me because I got EAL help in the final year or so—Grade 8 and 9 at the

elementary/middle years school. The EAL help wasn't a class, I did not have to go into a class and sit there. It was with a teacher who decided to take me on and started giving me help. She was the one who was spending extra time with me before school or after, or between classes to help me read and such, just to help me catch up. The help was great. I didn't really like to go, but I knew I needed to go as I needed to improve. That's why I did it, I had to!

The most difficult parts of school in Canada were learning to speak the language and making friends. Trying to talk to a kid who's lived here all his life was difficult, as they talked quickly and in slang. I didn't always understand what they were saying. Also, I believe at that time, that I was the only refugee attending that school.

At the end, I had some good friends, but it was a very rough start at the beginning. Some kids called me names, and I would fight with them, as I didn't know what else to do. Eventually the students who called me names accepted me. I did have some friends and we would talk about sports and TV shows. We would run around and push each other on the playground. There will always be some people you're not going to get along with—especially in elementary school. Everyone's just trying to find their place. I was trying to find my place, and so were they, but I didn't know that at the time.

Some of those friends I made at high school I still see from time to time, but we have gone our separate ways. When I see some of them at the

mall or around the community, we do say “hi,” but that's about it. We don't call each other, as everybody's gone their separate ways.



**Charles Bendu** arrived in Winnipeg from Sierra Leone in 2006. He is a graduate of the Academic and Professional Bridging Program for Internationally Trained Teachers (IET Program, University of Manitoba, Faculty of Education). He is now a Special Education Resource Teacher at Dufferin School in Winnipeg School Division.

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## Life Today and Hopes for the Future

Everything is good at home. I feel that I had a good experience in the schools in Canada and I felt they prepared me for the future. The other students often asked me why I was going to the teachers for extra help and EAL support. Sometimes I would miss gym and instead sit with the teachers. But all the decisions you make throughout your life lead you to where you are now. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be sitting here now.

When I graduated, I was doing different jobs like managing at a Wendy's. I started working when I was in Grade 7 and throughout high school. In high school, I worked about 18-20 hours during the week, about 3 hours each day. Now I am a contractor and work for Canadian National/Canadian Pacific Railways (CN/CP). They give out the contracts. I work more like an independent or private company. I build railway tracks. I would like to go to a trade school and learn more about a trade. I still don't know what I want to do, really. I know what I have to do. I am able to save some money towards going to a trade school.

Reflecting back, perhaps there is one thing that schools could do to help students like me. They could do more hands-on activities and more shops classes and take some of the newcomers to the different shops. They could take them to factories, workplaces, or field trips to some places where students can get vocational training such as Red River College, so they can learn what's out there.



**Ishmael Beah**, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, published his best-selling memoir, "A Long Way Gone." At the age of 12, Beah fled his home and family following an attack by rebels and began to wander the turbulent West African country in search of safety. At 13, he was picked up by the government army and forced to fight with them for two years. Beah was eventually released and sent to a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) rehabilitation centre. From there, he moved to the United States where he attended high school and college and has since become an influential advocate and writer. Beah has worked with groups and students in Manitoba.

© UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe. Ishmael Beah, Former Child Soldier, Addresses Press Conference. CC License.

This way they can develop an idea of what they would like to do after leaving high school, and they can look forward to something when they're done and have something to think about. I didn't have those opportunities.

I'm very satisfied with life and experiences in Canada and my prospects for the future. I feel like I've learned a lot up to this point. But there's always more to know and to learn. I need to spend more time listening to the news and listening to the radio.

Canada, Manitoba, and Winnipeg are all very unique. They are very safety-oriented. Everybody tends to keep to themselves, but at the same time they know when to reach out to people. That's what I like about this place—somebody reached out to me—the first teacher I had reached out to me, and gave me a chance. I couldn't imagine being here today in this position without her.

## VIDEO RESOURCES

See [Caution Concerning the Use of Resources about War and Refugee Experiences](#).

### **History of the Conflict: Sierra Leone**

*The Story of Sierra Leone (Part 1 and 2)* by Nathan Mascardo and Rachel Sullivan: A student-made film for Invisible Children Conference at Ferris High School.

- Part 1:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUDovmygWYc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUDovmygWYc)
- Part 2:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIX9twDZzDQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIX9twDZzDQ)

*Witness To Truth: A Video Report On The Sierra Leone Truth And Reconciliation Commission* by Witness is a video about the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and accompaniment to an official TRC report.  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJbLHAX4k8Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJbLHAX4k8Q)

### **Child Soldiers**

*Jonathan Torgovnik's 'Girl Soldier,' Life After War in Sierra Leone*: The women caught up in Sierra Leone's brutal civil war tell filmmaker, Jonathan Torgovnik, how they have coped in the decade since the country and their lives were torn apart.  
<http://proof.nationalgeographic.com/2014/06/18/jonathan-torgovniks-girl-soldiers/>

*Girl Soldiers—The Story from Sierra Leone* by The New Zealand Herald: Child protection expert Dr. Mike Wessells of Columbia University recently visited New Zealand as a guest of ChildFund New Zealand to share his expertise and draw attention to the plight of the world's so-called lost generation—formerly recruited child soldiers.  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=eINH\\_QggsEg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eINH_QggsEg)

*Special Assignment—Sierra Leone: Children of War (Parts 1–3)* by Special Assignment's Jacques Pauw and Adil Bradlow, is a three-part series of videos. This award-winning documentary on child soldiers and the horrors of the Civil War in Sierra Leone. This documentary won the CNN African Journalist of the Year Award in 2000.

- Part 1:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=PugaQJcAn64](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PugaQJcAn64)
- Part 2:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=merqFuel-\\_o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=merqFuel-_o)
- Part 3:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc7K1X71xV8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc7K1X71xV8)

### **Sierra Leonean Refugees**

*Life in a refugee camp: Marie* by WAtoday.com.au: “Marie Sesay was eight-years-old when she fled war-torn Sierra Leone for a refugee camp in Guinea where food was scarce and sanitation obsolete. Now aged 25 and studying in Sydney, she tells her story to mark World Refugee Day 2014.”  
<http://media.watoday.com.au/news/national-news/life-in-a-refugee-camp-marie-5529074.html>

*Breaking Rocks* (2010) by IRIN (IRIN is the humanitarian news and analysis service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs): This video looks at the hundreds of Sierra Leonean children who work breaking rocks for construction in order to pay for their school fees.  
[www.irinnews.org/film/4211/Breaking-Rocks](http://www.irinnews.org/film/4211/Breaking-Rocks)

*Education: an enduring casualty of war* by UNICEF, describes efforts to rebuild the education system after war.  
<http://vimeo.com/21068030>

*Sierra Leone Refugee All Stars* are a group of six Sierra Leonean musicians who came together to form a band while living in a West African refugee camp. Links to several videos follow:

- *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars* by Panagea Day:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA4z2sd3fOI>
- *SLRA's Refugee Rolling | Playing For Change* by Playing For Change:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyB6Vk25RHY&list=PLkmRgXU17ME9AQDa46EfIS-ff9QhnhHUb](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyB6Vk25RHY&list=PLkmRgXU17ME9AQDa46EfIS-ff9QhnhHUb)

*Amputee Football* (2010) by IRIN, profiles the determination of a Sierra Leonean man to keep playing the game he loves despite losing a leg during his country's long and vicious civil war.  
[www.irinnews.org/film/4244/Amputee-Football](http://www.irinnews.org/film/4244/Amputee-Football)

### **Sierra Leoneans in the Diaspora**

Ishmael Beah, former child soldier born in Sierra Leone, now 26 years old, tells a powerfully gripping story. Links to two videos follow:

- *Former child soldier Ishmael Beah recounts his past* by Allan Gregg In Conversation:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kEL\\_LRBSqk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kEL_LRBSqk)
- *Life After War in Sierra Leone* by Big Think:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwV4plmBdpA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwV4plmBdpA)

*Sierra Leone family adjusts to winter in Winnipeg* by CBC Winnipeg shows how a Sierra Leone family adjusts to Winnipeg during one of the coldest winters on record.

[www.cbc.ca/player/Embedded-Only/News/Local+News/Manitoba/Homepage/ID/2440095204/](http://www.cbc.ca/player/Embedded-Only/News/Local+News/Manitoba/Homepage/ID/2440095204/)

For additional resources concerning Sierra Leone and Liberia, see the [Video Resources](#) provided at the end of Navaeh's narrative.