



Resident is a diplomatic peacekeeper

Frances Fortune aiming to make a difference to people in Sierra Leone

Melanie Cummings, Special to the Post

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It's rainy season in Sierra Leone, the time when its diamond-saturated earth turns to mud and reveals such gems en masse.

Ironically, it's the rain, not the civil war that broke out due to government corruption and mismanagement of the country's abundant natural resource, that brought Francis Fortune back to the city of her childhood for a recent holiday and to visit her mom, Kay Barclay.

Lolling under the Canadian heat at a Georgian Bay summer camp and traversing the asphalt on bike around Burlington are now the stuff of childhood memories for Fortune's son Michael, 14, and daughter Jandeh, 10. The ever-present clouds of pollution spewing from too many cars motoring along the streets outside their home in West Africa make such leisurely cycling here ever more desirable.

DIPLOMATIC PEACEKEEPER

Twenty-three years ago Fortune, a wide-eyed Good Samaritan, headed to Sierra Leone working as a volunteer with CUSO (formerly Canadian University Services Overseas), a non-government international development organization that places skilled Canadians in emerging nations. It was the Queen's University geology graduate's job to teach science at a small school in North Kabala.

The idealistic volunteer also fell in love there and married commercial farmer Cyril Fortune. Subsequently, she became a mom and, over the years, has evolved into a diplomatic peacekeeper of sorts.

In the late 1980s, Fortune ran an agricultural development project but when civil unrest broke out in 1991, the work was abandoned and, instead, she set to work helping build toilets in refugee camps in Liberia, where more than two million residents were displaced as a result of the fighting. During the war years, she and her infant son lived for four months in such a camp.

The former schoolteacher and farmhand now commands the attention of a room full of former rebel soldiers, who, in the midst of the country's civil war, carried out atrocities on their neighbours.

When a ceasefire led to an official declaration that the war was over, on Jan. 18, 2002, officials set to work on negotiating the Lome Accord, which called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to provide a forum for both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their stories and facilitate genuine reconciliation.

Formally, both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court began operating in the summer of 2002 to air these complaints. The court tries those who "bear the greatest responsibility for the commission of crimes against humanity, war crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law, as well as crimes under relevant Sierra Leonean law within the territory of Sierra Leone since Nov. 30, 1996," states the Lome Accord.

Informally, Fortune, 50, has worked with military factions teaching former militia and rebel soldiers alike, the new rules as set out in the accord. Through simple community meetings, neighbours, who at one time



A MOTHER, A PEACEKEEPER AND HONOURARY CONSUL: Frances Fortune gives her daughter, Jandeh, a hug during a recent visit to Burlington. Fortune, a Nelson High School graduate, has spent 23 years in Sierra Leone and her role includes being a peacekeeper, educator as well as Canada's honorary consul in that country.

were so at odds with each other they would kill, now explore the reasons why war ever broke out in the first place.

Fortune searches for common ground in many capacities but mainly pushes a peace agenda. Since most of the population is illiterate, she communicates her message through radio.

"We brought the accord home, explaining to citizens their responsibilities as law-abiding people. We took it to the ground and started the reconciliation process," said Fortune who has been the Africa Director of Search for Common Ground since 2006. The non-governmental organization aims to transform the way the world deals with conflict -- away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving.

In other words, finger-pointing, blame and anger at these community gatherings are all checked at the door prior to the meaningful discussions.

REBUILDING COMMUNITIES

As a white woman in a black country who speaks the patois of Krio, Fortune has somehow garnered Sierra Leoneans' trust as an impartial insider, someone with one foot in the community and one out.

"Most people don't want war. I was simply the catalyst to help them reconcile. We're building the momentum for peace. It takes finesse, cultural insight and strong networks," said the Nelson High School graduate.

Getting the community rebuilding represents a long road that was preceded by fulfilling practical needs: to stop the war, find food and build shelter. There was no time for grievances to be settled, as survival became the new priority.

Fortune wears another hat, too, as Canada's honorary consul in Sierra Leone. Trained in Ottawa, she is the go-to person for any Canadians residing in Sierra Leone. There are about 40 Canadians currently living in this undeveloped country of 6.2 million people, mostly RCMP officers and military folk. The Canadian government closed the formal embassy in favour of gathering a network of ex-patriots to look after each other's welfare.

In her ambassador's role, Fortune has helped replace passports, return ailing Canadians who need care back home and provided many other information-sharing tasks.

She is also heavily focused on bolstering education throughout the country, personally sponsoring the education of 10 children.

In Africa, 50 per cent of the population is under age 21, which puts more students in school, in a system that is already desperate for enough teachers. Sierra Leone's government is also committed to 100 per cent literacy so the whole country really has to go to school.

Slowly this Canadian transplant and mother of two is changing the national conscious in Sierra Leone, one person at a time, and one community meeting at a time.

But as much as Sierra Leone has a long road ahead of it, there's a lot Canadians can learn from them, said Fortune -- about community sharing and caring, especially as forgiveness is becoming the country's national treasure.

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