

Mariatu:

ARMED *for*

PEACE



MARIATU: Armed for Peace uncovers both the horrors of the war in Sierra Leone where children killed and maimed children, and demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit when those young people reunite and join forces to battle the effects of war on their lives and on the lives of other young people.

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Background

Mariatu Kamara was born in Sierra Leone, West Africa. When she was 12-years-old she was raped. Both hands were amputated by rebels – child soldiers with the Revolutionary United Front. During Sierra Leone’s decade-long civil war, more than a million people were displaced, murdered, raped and maimed. Half of the victims were children. On a rampage called ‘No Living Thing’, inspired by the threat of an election, rebels brutally “cut” their victims’ hands and arms because people voted with their hands. The rebels didn’t want their victims to cast ballots against them. The rebels sent a gruesome message. A civil war became an unprecedented aberration whose only outcome was human misery.

For more than three years, Mariatu lived in a refugee camp for amputees in Freetown, capital city of Sierra Leone, named for the profusion of liberated slaves re-homed there from all parts of Africa in the 19th century. For the first year and a half, she was deeply depressed. Her son, conceived from the rape, died from malnutrition in the camp. Mariatu attempted suicide.

Then Mariatu got involved in a theatre troupe with other young people from the camp. This theatre troupe, which combined dance, music and drama, toured Sierra Leone. The youth gave performances on such topics as the spread of HIV/AIDS and the impact of war on children, and the power of forgiveness.

Mariatu moved to Canada in 2003. She didn’t speak a word of English. She had never set foot in a school. She had been a simple village girl. If war had not come to her life, she might have been married and raising a family by the time she was 14. At first, Mariatu wanted to return to Sierra Leone to be with her friends from the theatre troupe, all of whom are amputees like herself. Despite the difficult conditions at the refugee camp, she and the others formed deep and lasting bonds. Young people were united by the horrors of the war, and the physical and emotional wounds that they lived with every day. They were also bound by a sense of almost unimaginable spirit and resilience that birthed their capacity to create a theater company that brought joy to others.



PHOTO: J.P. MOCZULSKI

Fast Forward to the Future

Toronto-based journalist, Susan McClelland first met and interviewed Mariatu in 2003. In April 2007, Susan wrote a profile of Mariatu in the *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper. The story of Mariatu was featured alongside a story about Ishmael Beah, author of *A Long Way Gone-Memories of a Child Soldier*.

Like Ishmael, Mariatu had come a long way. She is now a high school graduate, and started college this fall. Following the stories in the *Globe and Mail*, Mariatu was offered a special representative position with UNICEF. She will speak publicly for UNICEF on the impact of war on girls. There is talk of UNICEF building a campaign around Mariatu and Ishmael, who has been made a youth ambassador in the United States. Furthermore, Annick Press, known for its groundbreaking young adult fiction on subjects like HIV/AIDS and war, will be publishing Mariatu’s story in 2008, co-written with Susan McClelland.

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A Remarkable Meeting

A few days after the school shooting at Virginia Tech, Mariatu and Ishmael met. They talked about the past and the future, and then hugged. Forgiveness, reconciliation and hope for peace, flooded their hearts and the hearts of those who were present.

A Dream Is Born

From Mariatu and Ishmael's meeting, a dream was born—to reunite many of the youths Mariatu had known from the refugee camp in Sierra Leone.

Three years ago, Mariatu began to scour the Internet, post messages on Sierra Leone websites and call across North America and Africa looking for the youth she had become close to at the refugee camp. Some of her friends had been adopted by American families or brought to the United States through special children's programs. Others, like her cousin, Adama, had been left behind in Sierra Leone and often beg for food and money to survive.

Through Laura Simms, Ishmael's mother and a storyteller devoted to peace and compassionate action, Mariatu's dream of holding a reunion of her friends, both those who live in North America and those still in Sierra Leone, is becoming a reality. When Laura learned of Mariatu's desire, she immediately contacted her friend, Paul Dolan, of the Sterling Foundation. He has offered their retreat centre in upstate New York where Sierra Leone children and child survivors of 9/11 have met in the past. The reunion will take place in the summer of 2008.

An Ambassador for Peace

One of Mariatu's personal goals for the reunion is to reunite the theatre troupe originally formed at the refugee camp. With the help of storytellers, singers, musicians and dancers, Laura will help them create a new performance piece, while those from Sierra Leone will receive training in theater, therapy and reconciliation. Furthermore, documentary film-makers will teach the young people to use cameras so they can document their own stories and their involvement in the theatre troupe, in the US and on their return to Sierra Leone. With expert psychologists and trained drama, art and music therapists, Mariatu aims to arm youth with skills for their return home. Young war victims will become

stewards of forgiveness; facilitators who can draw on their personal experiences as well as their new-found skills to help other children and communities effected by the war.

The Reunion

The purpose of the reunion is to bring together 25 young people, victims of amputation and trauma during Sierra Leone's decade long civil war, who were members of a theatre troupe based in the refugee camp for amputees in Freetown.

Fifteen of the young people live in the United States; five live in Canada; and 10 of the 25 youth remain in Sierra Leone. They will be brought to the Sterling Foundation at Arrow Park, New York. Mariatu has made contact and knows the whereabouts of all these youth.

The REUNION will consist of a two day rest, meeting and planning. It will be followed by a 7-day retreat at the Sterling Foundation's upstate New York facility. Activities will be planned that will serve to create a group storytelling-music performance and will include documentary film-makers teaching the youth how to use and carry the cameras. With the help of invited well known Sierra Leone pop singer Daddy Saj, Lion King drummer Randy Crafton, Laura Simms storyteller, Therapist Beth Hedva, and traditional Mende Griot Kewaley Kamara, and psychologists trained in dealing with child victims of war, the theatre group will be reformed.

Possible Outcomes of the Reunion

- Following the reunion, youth will head to the United Nations in New York where they will present their theatre production, as well as their documentary footage on the sharing of their own stories and a presentation on the impact of war on children. We are discussing this with the Secretary General's special commission on Children Effected by War.
- The creation of a series of films (see film proposal for *Mariatu—Armed For Peace*). Footage from the film will be purposed in five ways:
 - A TV hour length show
 - A feature length documentary
 - A series of video diaries, shot by the youth, chronicling their personal stories and their participation at the retreat. These will be edited together and shown at the United Nations

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- An educational series of short videos for use in conjunction with a school-based curriculum guide co-written by UNICEF that raises the issues of children and war and their drive to become global citizens and compassionate human beings with the power to forgive and love.
- A series of short videos, co-edited and directed by psychologists who have worked with children in refugee and war situations that demonstrate and raise issues and concerns for the training of humanitarian aid workers and facilitators who want to learn more about the specific problems children face during war and their needs for rehabilitation. These videos will illustrate the role theatre, dance and music play in the youths' healing transformation into believing in themselves again and becoming active citizens in society.
- A template for such a reunion or 'camp' for children/youth from refugee situations to be ongoing at the Sterling Foundation.
- A template for such a reunion or 'camp' for children/youth from refugee situations to be modeled around the world.
- Educational materials for schools and organizations internationally on the use of creative arts, specifically combining traditional storytelling with personal narrative as a means of promoting tolerance, healing from trauma and resilience.
- A collection of the children's stories shared at the camp—both fictional and real, to be presented to the United Nations and published in 2009.

What we need

- co-sponsors and funders for the reunion and the various film outcomes.
- co-sponsor(s) for the United Nations visit of the youth following the reunion.

Organizers

Laura Simms, Artistic Director of the Reunion will, among other things, be responsible for the hiring of psychologists, actors, dancers and musicians to work with the youth; liaising with UNICEF and United Nations officials; the creation of a template for the reunion that can be used as a model for children in crisis situations around the world; and the overseeing of various parts of the film. Laura will also collaborate with UNICEF officials and representatives from Annick Press to assemble a North-American school-based curriculum guide on the impact of war on children.

Susan McClelland will co-produce and write the film; solicit funders for the film; and oversee all aspects of the various films to come out of this project. Susan will also assist in fundraising, particularly in Canada, for the reunion and co-organize the travel of the six youth from the theatre troupe now living in Canada. Susan will also work with Laura in the assembly of the children's stories and the curriculum guide.

Paul Dolan, President of the Sterling Foundation, is executive director of ABC News International News. He will provide help with funding and finding an administrative director.

Mariatu Kamara will help coordinate the reunion, including liaising with Ishmael and the other youth and steering the vision for the reunion, theatre troupe, films and curriculum guide.

Ishmael Beah, advisor.

DADDY SAJ special guest.

Kewaley Kumara, advisor.

Koni Harding, director of a girls school in Freetown, born in Sierra Leon, was a schoolteacher for the United Nations School for 25 years. She is presently collecting children's stories.

Ann Norman, Media specialist for President Kabbah of Sierra Leone, will provide in country administration for travel and communications. And pr.