



The International Soroptimist – June 2009 edition

“I was never as proud to be a Soroptimist”

The first Study Tour for Project Sierra: a Family and a Future was in early February. What joy and relief as eight Soroptimists from all Federations walked from Sierra Leone’s international airport into the hot, dry night - two days late after flights cancelled in snowy London!

The next four days were exhilarating, emotional and mostly joyous experiences. We learned so much and witnessed the great difference you are making in the lives of women, children and entire communities, through our Quadrennial Project.

We drove over 17 hours and 700 kilometres in three days visiting the Project in Bo, Makeni and the Kamakwie area. Red dust became our close companion on the unpaved dirt roads! The journeys alone, through towns and countryside, were an enriching experience.

Our first stop was HANCI-SL’s centre in Bo - a peaceful haven on the edge of the bustling city. Many of the 93 young mothers welcomed us, singing and dancing, accompanied by lively drumming from two young boys who previously lived on the streets. “Our girls” sang that we had given them a new future, opportunity to survive and become self-reliant. They looked so very young. It was an emotional introduction.

The resourcefulness of these young women impressed us greatly. They were lively, confident and took great pride in their work. We also visited graduates of earlier programmes, including Isatu and Hawa who now work in partnership producing tie-dyed cotton. They market the material in nearby villages, where they purchase foodstuffs and firewood to sell in the city. We met them at work in their front yard; neighbours looked on and we saw they are respected young entrepreneurs in their community. Isatu thanked Soroptimists for enabling more young women like herself to become strong, financially independent and able to provide a caring home for their children.

Next day in Makeni we were greeted in a hall filled with families and children, including young mothers, smartly dressed in their school uniforms. The one who welcomed us is the Head Girl of her secondary school. We danced with them and prospective Soroptimist members who came in blue to greet us warmly.

Again, we met current and past Project beneficiaries. Jeneba had joined the young mothers’ programme after the war, traumatised and pregnant after years living with rebels, and having lost all her family. HANCI-SL supported her wish to train as a

mechanic. She is now a vehicle engineer and driver in the Army. We visited her and her senior officers who were proud to work with this dedicated, competent young woman.

Visiting families recently enrolled to the integrated child and family support programme caused sombre reflection – the desperate poverty of carers in poor health, with no means of livelihood; a family of fifteen living in two small rooms. Do they have any prospect of a sustainable future? Joe told us we could be surprised. He introduced us to another family, whose situation had seemed hopeless before joining the programme a year ago. Now, with a dwelling built with neighbours' help using materials provided through HANCI-SL, the mother assisted to start small scale trade and farming, and her children in school, they are well on the way to supporting themselves.

Leaving Makeni before dawn to go to Kamakwie, for two hours we met no other vehicles as we passed lush vegetation and villages waking up – women cooking by the fire-side; children walking to the river for water or carrying wood. After meeting the staff in the small Kamakwie office, we were honoured with an audience with the Paramount Chief. He spoke eloquently of the importance of women realising their potential to play leading roles in the community, and how the work of HANCI-SL is “helping us to help ourselves”. He thanked Soroptimists for our support and making the world a global village.

Then, along rough tracks to two villages, each with four families currently in the programme. In Masankari, women led us dancing and singing to the thatched meeting hut where the Chief and community welcomed us warmly. We saw how the programme has empowered this village to work together to secure a brighter future for all. The Chief assured us that they would continue it when we leave.

As he spoke, trays of freshly cooked rice, chicken and fish stew were served - it was delicious! Our visit was all too brief. As we prepared to leave, a lady whose home had been repaired with support from the programme ran to greet us, holding six eggs in a fold of her blouse. No words were needed; her smile alone showed her joy at being able to present us with this precious gift. We met such openness and generosity throughout our visit from women who have so little material wealth. It was truly humbling.

The professionalism and commitment of HANCI-SL's staff impressed us. They are clearly held in high esteem. It confirmed the importance of training local people to run our programs. They know best their communities' need and customs. President-Elect Hanne said: the work is sustainable, efficient and warm-hearted. The staff has a good understanding how to improve the life-conditions of vulnerable people in their areas. We saw how important it is to have good cooperation with the chiefs and community leaders. They have achieved this in all areas.

We enjoyed much Soroptimist conversation and friendship too! A special treat was to spend time with women in Bo and Makeni who aim to charter as Soroptimist clubs. Their energy and enthusiasm was infectious! SI Freetown club's President-Elect Fatmata travelled with us, and club members hosted a farewell party and visits to club projects in Freetown.

HANCI-SL and HHC left no stone unturned to ensure the Study Tour ran smoothly and was a success. We owed Joe, John and colleagues many thanks for this “once in a lifetime” experience. It was a great privilege to represent you.

As Sharon says, "We made new friendships, enriched our Soroptimist experience and increased our awareness of how truly blessed we are. We not only live in places that enjoy freedom, access to resources such as health care, education and safety, but because of our experience on this trip, we witnessed how we can improve the lives of women and girls who are the same as us, but not so fortunate. I was never as proud to be a Soroptimist!"

Do continue your support and transform yet more lives through Project Sierra: a Family and a Future!

The Study Tour group were: (SIA) Sharon Fisher, Bev Bucur; (SIE) Gerd Stenberg, SI President-Elect Hanne Jensbo; (SIGBI) Anne MacDonald, Hilary Ratcliffe; (SISWP) Paula Siddle, Sandra Mottram; with Alison Sutherland (SI Project Liaison). Haja Fatmata Cole, President-Elect, SI Freetown accompanied us. Joe Glackin, Africa Programmes Director of Hope and Homes for Children, and John Momodu Kargbo of in-country partner HANCI-SL, were with us throughout, organising all project visits and practical arrangements.