

“THANK YOU – HANCI-SL. YOU HAVE DRIED UP OUR TEARS AND GIVEN US HOPE FOR THE FUTURE”

These were the words I noticed on the wall on an embroidered plaque in the Office of the Director of HANCI-SL – (Help A Needy Child In Sierra Leone) in his Freetown office, Sierra Leone. The words touched me and sent a tingle down my spine – there was so much in those few words! HANCI-SL works in partnership with Hope and Homes for Children's to manage and deliver Project Sierra, our Quadrennial Project. The words touched me and sent a tingle down my spine – there was so much in those few words!

I spent a few days in the UK before going to Sierra Leone to visit our Project. This was an experience more than I had anticipated. I was prepared for a rough ride, but this was not so. The roads may not have been the best, but the warmth of friendship and the gratitude expressed by the girls at the various centres was incredible.

The Official launch of the project was in Freetown where SI got good publicity in the local papers; on the radio and on TV. The staff of HANCI-SL and the local Soroptimists worked extremely hard to ensure all was in place for the launch, held at the British Council headquarters in Freetown.

The next day was an early start to the first centre – Bo. I was told these were good roads but one did have to raise an eyebrow every now and then at the large pot holes we encountered – nevertheless, our drivers were excellent and I did feel safe and well cared for. The centre is large and has only a few staff but trains girls as seamstresses; in catering; tie & dye techniques; and other educational activities. Some of the girls have ambitions to become accountants; do commerce; become teachers.

All the beneficiaries, as they are called by the HANCI-SL staff, were very grateful to Soroptimists, Hope and Homes for Children and HANCI-SL for providing them with opportunities for study and a better quality of life. We were treated to lunch cooked by the girls who were very proud of their efforts and it was a greatly appreciated meal too that we enjoyed. The fruit was grown in the gardens surrounding the centre – eating a pineapple that has just been picked and served was delicious!

We visited some of the girls where they are working since completing training and once again the gratitude expressed made any discomfort insignificant – it was pleasure to be there and see the girls in action, proudly displaying independence and dignity.

From Bo we went to Makeni – once again greeted with song and dance as we arrived. I was amazed at the dedication of the staff at these centres -working tirelessly to ensure the girls and their children were cared for and on the road to recovery and a better future. The notes kept for each girl and her child are impeccable – limited use of electricity and water did not matter; the work was done! The centres were clean and the girls and children happy and content.

We saw some of the girls that have started their own businesses and are living independently. They have done well and are now supporting their grandparents (mainly grandmothers) who had supported them during the hard times.

From Makeni we went to Kamakwie and then Tambakha which is near the border of Guinea – had to get there on a ferry that was made of timber and pulled manually by cables! Once again the welcome was tremendous – the whole village was there to meet us at the gates and we walked in the mid-day sun to be met by elders/chiefs (men and women). Among the many speeches was a phrase I had heard before and want to share here. The chief said “After the war many NGOs came and promised help but because of the bad roads none returned, yet HANCI-SL returns every week despite rain or sun to ensure that we are well and to continue caring for us.” This gratitude from the whole village was sufficient to make this whole trip worthwhile.

After returning to Freetown we visited the centre in the city at Kissy, where once again we got a warm welcome and were shown around the centre. Here the girls, after they finish their course as seamstresses, are given a treadle sewing machine, cotton and material to start them off. Similarly the girls doing hairdressing are given a kit to start them with their first employment opportunity.

It was most gratifying to see the results of the work by HANCI-SL and the Hope and Homes for Children and we can rest assured that we have valuable partners for this Quadrennial Project.

Margaret Lobo, President, Soroptimist International

(from The International Soroptimist, June 2008)