

# A teacher's love

*A local teacher's newly found purpose in Africa*



Donna Avila (burgundy t-shirt) surrounded by many of the children of the Abigail Butscher Primary School in Sierra Leone.

**It's amazing to me, being** a grown woman, that there were so many feelings and emotions that I had yet to experience. In order to find them, I needed to take a step out of my comfort zone and do something different. I did just that when I traveled to Sierra Leone, Africa this past June.

My husband, Marco, is the co-founder and executive director of The Healing Hands Foundation, whose purpose is to provide medical treatment to children in third world countries. For years, I have been the one holding down the fort while he traveled to places like Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala. I would listen to his stories of the many children who received life changing medical treatments. These treatments would never have been available to them without the free surgeries provided by the top notch American doctors who volunteer for THHF. As he showed me pictures of the kids and told me their dramatic stories, I thought I understood his experiences, but I never truly grasped the enormity of it until I actually made a trip myself.

When my husband came home last January and asked me if I wanted to go to Africa, I must admit that I first thought it would be impossible. The Healing Hands Foundation had been asked to team up with The Madiou Williams Foundation. The union was formed in order to provide both educational and medical assistance. As a teacher, my purpose would be to assist at The Abigail Butscher Primary School in Calaba Town. Madiou, an NFL football player for the Minnesota Vikings, built the school in honor of his mother.

With the offer from my mother, who agreed to watch my son, and the option to take our twelve-year-old daughter on the trip, I started to see that it would be possible after all. Even more than that, I began to feel an overwhelming desire that the trip was something I must do.

Preparations for the mission began four months prior to our trip. It required a huge, group effort to get us ready. Madiou Williams worked diligently, with my husband, coordinating all the arrangements of our trip to Freetown, Sierra Leone. My daughter, Emma, began collecting school supplies donated by the students at Hereford Middle School, our friends from The Each One Reach One Foundation in Shrewsbury, PA donated things like soccer balls and school supplies and many children from Prettyboy Elementary School donated their soccer uniforms. It was priceless to see the faces of the boys when they received those uniforms. Next year I hope to take full sets of uniforms with their school name on them. The children want to be able to play in competitions against other schools and the amount of pride generated by having a uniform with their name on it is beyond what we could imagine.

In speaking with co-workers about the preparations of our upcoming trip, I found two teaching colleagues interested in joining us. Most importantly, I applied for a grant from our employer, The Boys' Latin School of Maryland. The grant was awarded to the three teachers making the trip, and the money would be used for books and supplies, we would soon discover, the school desperately needed. By the time we set off for the 28 hour trip to Freetown in early June, we had readied ourselves as best we could with everything from Yellow Fever shots to lots of beef jerky. We had over 500 pounds each of school and medical supplies. And yes, we were carrying all of that along with our personal belongings needed for the trip.

During the twenty-eight hours of travel, the volunteers got to know each other. There were sixteen of us. We were two professional football players, three teachers, one twelve-year-old student from Hereford Middle School, two dentists, two doctors, three nurses, two engineers, and one financial advisor. Who knew that so many regular people could come together to do something so wonderful?

Upon the night of our arrival, we immediately got organized and locked in our plans. The teachers and dentists would head directly to the school to set up a dental clinic and meet with the teachers to make plans for the work to be done over the next four days. One medical team would set out for Connaught Hospital to begin assessing the needs there while the other medical, ob/gyn, team would head to the Woman's and Children's Hospital in order to begin their work.

Our first day at Abigail Butscher Primary School was a whirlwind of activity. We met with the teachers to talk about their needs. They showed us the single copies of books that were falling apart. They were copied, by hand, to the blackboards in order for the kids to work from them. They showed us the empty supply cupboards. It was the end of the year which meant the basic school supplies of paper, pencils, pens, and chalk had been depleted. The school children's uniforms were in bad shape, and quite a few children didn't even have uniforms. We soon discovered that there was also no water at the school, the well was not functional. Then the teachers shared that they had not received even half of their salary for the 2009/10 year.

The teaching team had to make some quick plans to figure out the logistics of finding material for new uniforms for the kids, hiring a tailor to make the uniforms, and finding Macmillan Africa to buy books. After our first full day of school we set off on the hour and a half drive back into Freetown to shop for those items. The Macmillan Africa store was easy to find and we picked out authentic African literature for the kids. We were able to buy them multiple copies of leveled readers at seven different reading levels. Shopping for the fabric, on the other hand, was unlike any shopping I had ever done. We had to sort through material at

multiple stalls in what was their "fashion district." After stops at over ten stalls we found the matching colors of the School uniforms. We purchased enough material to make 180 new uniforms which, luckily, the groundskeeper at the school could make for the children. After negotiating a price, arrangements were made with the head of the school to pay him as they were made. I can't wait to see the kids next June in their new uniforms.

Over the next few days the educational team spent time playing simple math games with the kids and observing the teachers working with the children. Some of the classes sang special songs for us and put on little performances. We had to show the teachers ways to use multiple copies of books because the idea of each child having his or her own is foreign to them. The children of Sierra Leone are so bright and beautiful and there is so much more they need. We spent hours handing out school supplies and the kids broke into song or applause every time we took them more school materials. The experience of being on the receiving end of such a heartfelt appreciation was overwhelming and the most beautiful thank you I could have received.

A last minute decision was made by the teaching team to pay the teachers their past due salary. They were overwhelmed with appreciation. We then made arrangements with Freetown Teacher's College to pay the tuition for two of the teachers from Abigail Butscher. The annual college tuition is one hundred dollars; their teaching salary is only eighty dollars per year. The teachers need to attend this college in order for the school to qualify for government assistance which is important, but how could they ever afford the tuition themselves? When the head of the school texted me to tell me that two of his teachers had started college because of the money we paid for their tuition, I shouted with delight to my fourth grade class. (Okay, so I checked my text during class, but I don't normally get them from Africa!)

While we worked to meet some of the needs at the school, the dental team was busy turning the school office into a dental clinic. All the kids at the school received dental care which entailed over 200 extractions of teeth which, if left, could cause life threatening infections. The medical team at Connaught hospital was simultaneously treating a girl, Zaina, who was suffering from just this type of life threatening abscess. At the same time, the ob/gyn team was performing life saving cesareans as of their first day at the hospital. It was joyful to hear about our Dr. Hector Terraza safely delivering a baby after learning that the same mother had lost two children due to complications during delivery. The mother was so appreciative that she named her baby Hector.

In Sierra Leone, one in five women die during childbirth and 40% of children die before their fifth birthday. The Madiou Williams Foundation and The Healing Hands Foundation are committed to work in Sierra Leone over the next five years to help improve those numbers. Overall, the medical team was able to perform many surgeries including: fixing deformities, C-Sections, hysterectomies, myomectomies, minor procedures, and consultations.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the trip for me was watching my daughter, Emma. She tirelessly gave to the children. Even after getting only a few hours of sleep after the long trip, she never faltered in her attention to them, from holding their hands while teeth were pulled to helping them play math games or read their new books. She even marched right into an operating room at the hospital, smiled at the woman about to have surgery, and told her how lucky she was to have a great doctor. She was as joyful in giving to them as they were to have her there. At the end of our first day, in a state of exhaustion, she took my hand and said, "Mom, I think that was the best day of my life." My daughter's eyes were

opened to the injustices of poverty and she has now decided that she may want to run a foundation like The Healing Hands. She, too, can't wait to return to see the kids at the school.

My work for the kids in Sierra Leone has just begun. I have overwhelming moments of wanting to drop everything I am doing and start organizing for my next trip. The experience of doing things for others so far away has changed me in many ways. I no longer have the same feeling about certain household jobs or luxuries, because I now realize how important it is to work toward bettering the lives of others who have so little. This is the type of work my husband is committed to through The Healing Hands Foundation. When I cheer for The Vikings, it is because I am cheering for someone who, like my husband, cares deeply about making the world a better place. My connection with the teachers at Abigail Butscher makes me work harder because I realize how easy it is for me to live and teach with all I have available to me. I can't wait to return to see the teachers I worked with for a week, but are in my heart daily.

Donna Avila

### How you can help

We know that everyone can not pick up and fly with us to Africa, but there are many other ways to help. For more information, please visit The Healing Hands Foundation website at [www.thhfoundation.org](http://www.thhfoundation.org). Check back often for details of our upcoming fundraiser at Little Havana, scheduled for February, 2011.



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