

October 2006

The Last Page: Reaching Sierra Leone

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Recommended Citation

Rhoda, Erin (2006) "The Last Page: Reaching Sierra Leone," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 95: Iss. 3, Article 12.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol95/iss3/12>

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REACHING SIERRA LEONE

By Erin Rhoda '06

During our first bed-net distribution in a village called Kendeyama, in Sierra Leone, West Africa, I sat with five of my best friends and a doctor in front of a crowd of more than 1,000 people. The village chief introduced us. Chief Vellah used a microphone attached to a loudspeaker that men had carried through the forest on their heads. There are no roads into Kendeyama—only a footpath and a bridge made of rough boards and tree limbs.

As the chief spoke, I noticed a beautiful young girl with her head covered in pink gauze. She was the only one in the crowd who held my gaze, and even when I turned away I could still feel her looking at me. Her eyes were kind and wise. She smiled a little. I felt connected to her somehow—as if we'd met before.

The path that led to our meeting had begun at Colby 18 months ago when David Amadu '07 had sat in a dorm room and told a group of Colby friends about his country, Sierra Leone. He'd described how his people were dying of malaria because they could not pay \$2.60 for a bed net.

After the country's 11-year civil war ended in 2002, Sierra Leone was the poorest country in the world—and malaria is both a reason for and consequence of Sierra Leone's poverty. According to one estimate provided by the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health, the disease causes an astounding 42 percent of pediatric deaths and 27 percent of all deaths. Surrounded by so much wealth at Colby, we had to act.

Emily Mosites '07, Peter Steinour '07, Kirsten Duda '09, Jessica Emerson '08, Amadu, and I began organizing a project to help reduce malaria in Sierra Leone. Our project had three parts: distribute 2,000 insecticide-treated bed nets to four villages, educate villagers about the causes and prevention of malaria, and volunteer in the community.

To organize what became the Sierra Leone Aid Project, we basically ran our own nonprofit while we were full-time college students. Our biggest hurdle was to raise enough money: \$23,000.

We first approached Colby but to our dismay we were told that our project was too dangerous and that the College would be liable if we were hurt. We were on our own.

So we wrote letters to everyone we knew. We contacted every church and business in Waterville, wrote two grants, sold African jewelry, and held a raffle and an "African extravaganza." We organized a church dinner, a



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A villager in Kendeyama, Sierra Leone, where Colby students and recent alumni distributed bed nets to combat malaria.

benefit concert, an auction, a pub night, a spaghetti supper, a library slideshow. We worked two and three jobs to make money to contribute. Amazingly, one week before we were due to leave, we met our fund-raising goal.

Nothing about organizing the project was easy, but once we arrived in Sierra Leone things fell into place. I never imagined that I would feel safer in Sierra Leone than in many U.S. cities, that I would be healthier and actually happier, but that was the case—despite the problems there.

In Kendeyama, Chief Vellah did a door-to-door survey of his jurisdiction and returned with startling information: of a population of 1,100, in the past year and a half 126 children and 59 adults had died of malaria.

Yet, in the face of so much death, we met people who were persevering and kind. When we gave bed nets as a gift to our driver, Sulai Sesay, he gave them all away to his family without keeping one for himself.

In the end, our project was a success. We distributed 2,000 nets and we educated at least as

many people about the causes and prevention of malaria by hiring professional comedians to enact skits to teach the villagers in their own language. We also volunteered at two orphanages, a nursery school, and two homes for people with polio.

But, as is the case with most aid trips, I suspect, it was us who changed more than the people of Sierra Leone. I now know just how stubborn I am—and must be—when confronted with the words “no” or “impossible.” And I know firsthand that the greatest rewards often arise from the greatest difficulties. I will be returning to West Africa this fall, this time to Ghana, to co-run a youth empowerment program and cross-cultural exchange with the Maine-Ghana Youth Network, a small nonprofit based on Mount Desert Island. Now I know more about where my life is heading.

As we handed each person a net, the girl in the pink gauze disappeared from the crowd. Maybe she had work to do in the fields before dark, or maybe she had to look after younger siblings. I don't know. Her family would pick up the nets without her. Wherever she is now, though, may she know that she is not forgotten and that, in my mind, her face has become the face of a nation: striking and inescapable.