

EMPOWER

Inspiring people to experience the power of their dreams

A SERVICE MAGAZINE

Issue 1

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Ferdinand from Sheltering Wings Orphanage, Yako, Burkina Faso

Dear Friend,

You are reading the very first issue of Empower, a service magazine aimed at inspiring people to experience the power of their dreams. Regardless of whether you are at the giving end or the receiving end, if you have dreams for yourself, for your community, or for your country, Empower is for you. With your dreams you can make the world a better place both for others and for yourself as well.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

There are many ways to give and receive. One of the contributors to this issue, Richard Gerlach, Director of "So Others Might Eat" (SOME), has suggested a great idea called the shoe box gift where you take any box lying around the house and fill it up with essential toiletries to be distributed to the homeless. Other contributors to this issue, Ruth Cox, Rose Howell, Gabriel Singer, and Lark Toney provide other valuable ideas.

I hope you enjoy Empower and that future issues can benefit from your articles. Please send them to me along with any suggestions for improving Empower at:

lara@empower-through-service.org

Lara Mitra, Editor

www.empower-through-service.org

Did You Know?

WHAT YOUR MONEY CAN BUY

-\$3 can buy a large wool blanket to protect a child from the cold during an emergency.

-\$17 can immunize a child against the 6 major childhood diseases.

-\$54 can buy 150 sachets of PlumpyNut, a ready-to-eat therapeutic spread to nourish children with acute malnutrition.

-\$100 can buy a kit with enough materials to test 100 children for the Hepatitis-B virus.

-\$500 can buy a year's supply of antiretroviral medicine for an HIV-positive child under three-years-old.

Support UNICEF's lifesaving work.

From:

<http://www.unicef.org/>

Interview of Sidwell Friends School Student Lark Toney

Interviewer: Please describe what your community service project entailed.

Lark: In my community service project I worked as a counselor at a local non-profit called Kid Power D.C. It is a camp designed to keep kids at three Washington D. C. Public Elementary Schools active and learning over the summer.

Interviewer: What was most rewarding for you?

Lark: The most rewarding part of it for me was being able to see the kids I was working with having fun and smiling.

Interviewer: What was the most challenging aspect of your community service?

Lark: The most challenging part of my community service was trying to cope with the personalities and different attitudes of each individual child. Some always wanted to play, some didn't even want to be there, some didn't want to participate in the games, others didn't want to sit down and read when it was time for that. Adjusting to different situations was a big challenge.



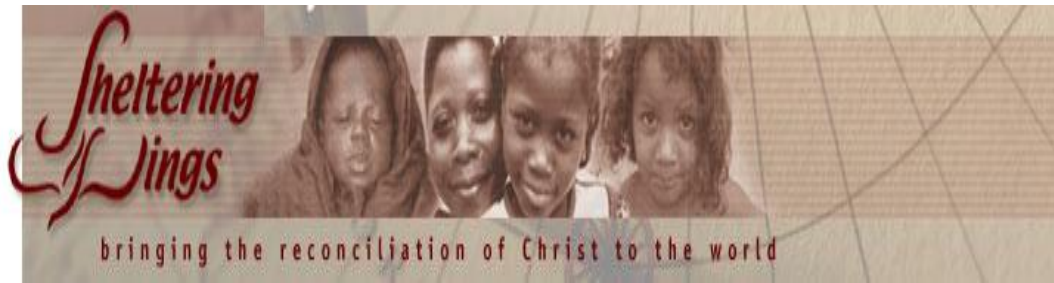
Lark, with Nyesha, a camper at Kid Power

Interviewer: What lessons did you learn as a result of your community service?

Lark: I learned that kids that live probably 15 minutes away from my school, Sidwell Friends, have completely different circumstances than any kid I have ever met in my life. I learned how to have a lot of patience, and to appreciate the basic things I have like a clean school building and parents that are able to take me to school everyday. I also learned that although we have drastic background differences, kids are all basically the same in any situation. They like to have fun, and when bored they act-up. Simple games which all can participate in are the best solution to this problem.

Interviewer: Would you recommend it to others? If so, why? If not, why not?

Lark: Of course I would recommend this to others! I had a great time being a counselor. I got to meet some awesome kids who made me laugh and let me in on their secrets. It was hard sometimes, as it typically is being a counselor, but seeing the smiling faces of the kids more than compensated.



Orphan babies at Sheltering Wings Orphanage in Yako, Burkina Faso

From www.sheltering-wings.org



United Nations World Food Programme

From: <http://www.wfp.org/ENGLISH/?ModuleID=137&Key=2756>
<http://www.wfp.org/ENGLISH/?ModuleID=137&Key=2756>

Interview of Sidwell Friends School Student Rose Howell

Interviewer: Please describe what your community service project entailed.

Rose: I worked with a service group in War, West Virginia, called Big Creek People in Action. We helped local people in poverty to fix their houses, basically doing anything we could from digging to hammering to sawing to painting.

Interviewer: What was most rewarding for you?

Rose: The most rewarding part for me was realizing how easy it is to improve someone's life, bring some hope and have fun all while doing a service project. I enjoyed working with the group leaders and the kids.

Interviewer: What was the most challenging aspect of your community service?

Rose: The most challenging part of the service was to not get frustrated with some of the beliefs that the people had that were very different from mine. We went to visit a coal mine and I was horrified that one of the workers said that he didn't care if the coal mine was polluting the air and that he would support the president who will keep the coal mines thriving without restrictions because it allowed him to have a fancy life, with "two cars". I had to really struggle with this attitude because I knew that he wanted to maintain his own life style at all costs, not caring about the future, not even his own. I was struck by the dangerous ignorance that often angers me in the newspapers but which I now encountered firsthand. I realized that although we were helping these people, this was only the tip of the iceberg—there is so much more that needs to be done to end poverty, poor education, unemployment, and pollution.

Interviewer: What lessons did you learn as a result of your community service?

Rose: One of the main lessons I learned was about teamwork. There are different roles you have to be able to play when you want to get something done. Sometimes you have to step-up and be the leader, and sometimes you have to follow the leader and work really hard to follow his/her instructions. Otherwise, nothing will get done. It's a matter of give and take involving lots of trust.

Interviewer: Would you recommend it to others? If so, why? If not, why not?

Rose: Yes, I would definitely recommend it! As you can see, I learned a lot and had a lot of fun, while making an impact.



**Rose Howell at a coal mine at Big
Creek People in Action**

Interview Of Richard Gerlach, Director of So Others Might Eat (SOME), Washington D.C., 2008

Lara: How long has SOME been in existence and what are SOME's key activities?

Mr. Gerlach: SOME has been in existence for thirty eight years (since 1970) of which I have been with SOME for thirty. SOME started out as a soup kitchen, primarily feeding hungry people in the district—hence its name. Even today SOME feeds the hungry—about 1,000 of them—serving breakfast and lunch seven days a week, 365 days a year. However, SOME now also offers a range of other programs from drug addiction treatment to elderly care to after school facilities to job training to housing for the homeless. SOME strives to ensure that its services go beyond basic survival needs and that they enable people to gain long-term independence and become respected members of society.



**Mr. Richard Gerlach,
Director of SOME**

Lara: How has the food crisis affected your food supply and donations and how do you ensure that the food you distribute is healthy and nutritious?

Mr. Gerlach: The economy and rising food prices have reduced contributions, but I hope that now and in the near future people will still find a way to donate foods, even with the prices skyrocketing. In the past, we received a lot of food donations that were not especially nutritious, but we have tried to encourage certain food groups such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables and this has increased the number of healthy foods we receive. However, we would never turn down food for being “not healthy enough” because some of the homeless men and women we serve need to consume calories which they get in all food.

Lara: What are you most proud of regarding your past success?

Mr. Gerlach: We are most proud of encouraging people to take ownership of their own lives by helping them to overcome addictions, learning new skills, moving into their own apartments, and living as respected members of society makes me proud. At SOME we call this “empowerment.” We treat people with respect and dignity and help them get back their self-esteem. It is rewarding to see the people we helped using their newly acquired life skills to help other people. As our newsletter describes, Perry is a perfect example. Perry believes that greeting the poor and homeless, who come through the doors of SOME everyday, with respect, warmth, and a smile makes a world of difference. Perry should know; he used to be one of them. When he first came to SOME, Perry was homeless and addicted to drugs. Today Perry is a member of SOME's dining room staff.

Lara: What are a few key lessons you have learned during your time at SOME?

Mr. Gerlach: The key lesson for me is that it is possible to overcome seemingly overwhelming obstacles. Even people in the direst situations can turn their lives around. SOME knows that what people want is dignity and respect. Not pity. Except for the basics of food and clothing SOME encourages small payments for its services when affordable, be it nominal rent for an apartment or a small fee for a training program. Being able to “pay” for a service out of their own earnings is very empowering for those we serve.

Lara: What can my friends and I do to help?

Mr. Gerlach: There is a great idea called the shoebox gift where you take any box lying around the house and fill it up with essential toiletries to be distributed to the homeless. More boxes are always welcome! You can give them to Lara or bring them to the SOME office at 71 O street NW Washington DC. Please go to www.some.org for a list of other ideas. Any help is greatly appreciated!



So Others Might Eat (SOME)

71 'O' Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001



Volunteers at SOME preparing lunch for the homeless

From: www.SOME.org

Experiences in Yako, Burkina Faso

Lara Mitra

My journey to Burkina Faso in 2007 is defined by the kids I met there. The beautiful landscape of West Africa and memories of baobab trees, half black and half white goats, and the sand-colored deserts are vividly etched in my mind at the moment, but these memories are likely to fade as the years go by. The faces of the children at the Sheltering Wings Orphanage, however, I will never forget.

All the children there touched my heart, but a handful grabbed it and reminded me of the things I take for granted everyday. They helped me put things in perspective and challenged me to think more deeply about what really matters and what is dispensable in life. And they gave new meaning to the seemingly ordinary concepts of simplicity, sharing, and perseverance that I had learned as a child. My childhood definitions of these concepts were:

Simplicity is plain and easy living.

Sharing is giving others a part of what is yours.

Perseverance is sticking to something until you meet your goal.

Then I met Adeline, Aminata, and Pierre.

Adeline was about 4 years old when she came to the orphanage. When I was Adeline's age, I whined for every toy in town--from Barbie dolls to remote controlled helicopters to Pokemon cards. I felt an obsessive desire to own every new toy advertised on television, never realizing that there could be more exciting alternatives. Adeline, however, taught me this simple truth in a short ten-minutes one sunny afternoon. Adeline cleared a patch on the ground and reached for the wheelbarrow. She roamed about the orphanage grounds in search of red earth, brown mud, leaves, twigs, bits of glass, and rags. When her wheelbarrow was full, she returned to her patch and proudly dumped out her treasures. Then she got down to the serious business of constructing her dream house. She built the walls and roof with earth and mud, artistically contrasting the red with the brown, she built window frames with the twigs using the leaves as curtains, and she laid the rags on the floor as carpets. The bits of glass adorned the roof and reflected off the sun.



Adeline and her mud house



Aminata taught me what sharing really means

During this entire construction project, Adeline looked up away from her creation only to see if I was still watching her. Her hands moved faster as she neared the end of her house. She ran to the nearest tree, picked a pink flower off of it and placed it on top of her house as a sign of completion and ended the afternoon with a huge smile. Adeline had looked for and found everything she needed right in her backyard. Adeline taught me that the objective is to have fun and that there are many different ways to have it.

Aminata was born in a small village near the border of Mali. Aminata is now almost three years old and lives at the orphanage. Aminata plays quietly in a room with scattered toys. There are more children than toys at the orphanage so all the toys are always in heavy demand. There is that special toy—a ghastly monster that every child in the orphanage craves for and that leads to lots of fist fights and screaming.

Aminata is shy and never grabs toys from other children. She waits for the monster to be abandoned and then quickly picks it up, savoring it for the few minutes it belongs to her. Aminata also never speaks. In fact, I hadn't heard Aminata say one word during my entire time at the orphanage. Aminata communicates with everyone through her large hand gestures, smiles, and tears. So I was surprised when one day during a routine play session, things got very loud with Aminata. Aminata picked up the monster and reached towards me, saying "oooh." I didn't know what she wanted or what she was trying to say and I decided she was just testing her vocal cords. But Aminata kept repeating her "ooohs" and they kept getting louder and louder. Later that night, I realized exactly what Aminata had meant. Her "oooh" was really a "you" and she was offering me her precious monster. Sharing your most prized possession with others shows true generosity and demonstrates the real meaning of the word 'sharing.'

Pierre is a 17 year old boy in the orphanage. Pierre was living alone in a small house in Yako trying to stay in school. When Pierre was 14, he heard that an orphanage was being established in Yako and went over to ask if he could live there. Pierre has found a passion since his arrival at the orphanage. Day in and day out he can be found dribbling or kicking a soccer ball. Pierre aspires to become a world class soccer player and he works hard to make that dream a reality. Every Saturday Pierre goes to the center of Yako to see the weekly soccer matches. He isn't old enough to play in them yet, but that is what he wants to do when he turns eighteen. One day, Pierre wants to represent his country in international soccer matches, playing on the world stage. He longs to see his name on the back of soccer jerseys, like Ronaldhino's and Messi's. The other children at the orphanage often ridicule Pierre for his extravagant ambition. But Pierre remains unfazed and knows that it is only a matter of time. He knows what he wants and he knows he can get it. Rain or shine, Pierre can be found on the soccer field getting closer and closer to his dream, one kick at a time.

Adeline, Aminata, and Pierre brought depth and richness to my understanding of simplicity, sharing, and perseverance:

Simplicity is having fun with whatever is around you.

Sharing is giving to others what is most special to you.

Perseverance is striving for the seemingly impossible and believing that it is totally possible.

Pierre juggling a soccer ball



Interview of Ruth Cox, Director of Sheltering Wings Orphanage, Yako, Burkina Faso, 2007

Lara: Where do the children come to the orphanage from?

Ruth: Kids come to the orphanage when someone drops them outside the gates of Sheltering Wings during the night or when a member of the extended family or neighbor brings a kid to me and requests that I take him/her in. Often, kids come to the orphanage through “Social Action” a government body in Burkina Faso, which is charged with the welfare of orphans and other needy people. “Social Action” picks up abandoned kids from the streets and brings them to me.

Lara: In Burkina Faso, what is the main cause of kids being orphaned?

Ruth: In order to officially be an orphan in Burkina Faso, a child must have lost at least one parent. Sometimes, the mother dies and there is no breast milk for the child. Given that formula milk is expensive and unaffordable for most families, some families send their child to the orphanage, but sometimes reintegrate their child back into their lives when he/she can eat solid food. In several instances, however, both parents have died due to a disease or an accident and the extended family is too poor to look after the child. HIV/AIDS is common in some areas. Fortunately, none of the children at Sheltering Wings have tested positive for this disease.

Lara: What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Ruth: Being able to make children with little opportunity happy and keep them healthy feels rewarding to me.

Lara: What is the hardest part of your job?

Ruth: Seeing children die, sometimes even in my own arms, is devastating. It is heart-breaking when despite doing everything in one’s power, a child does not make it. Also it is hard to see children struggling in school. For some kids, making the adjustments from their previous home into the orphanage is difficult and it pains me to watch them struggle. We try to give them a better foundation through additional tutoring and, of course, lots of affection and care.



From right to left:
Ruth Cox, Lara Mitra,
and Cleo Abram

Lara: What are some of the difficulties you have faced with the children?

Ruth: Keeping up with schoolwork is very difficult for some children. Classes are taught in French, which is a second language for most children (their first language is “Moray”), so much of the information that the teacher gives is not fully absorbed. Also, in the orphanage discipline is very important. The kids have to follow fairly strict rules of behavior. While living in the villages with their families, the kids have a very different sense of discipline. There is also often a cultural clash and many of the children have different beliefs about what is wrong and what is right. For example, I believe that girls and boys should get equal treatment. However, in Burkina Faso, boys are always favored over girls. In my orphanage I have to change the boy’s attitude towards the girls and teach them to treat the girls with respect.

Lara: What are the biggest constraints in your work?

Ruth: I feel that the lack of funding is the biggest problem in the orphanage. Each child is being taken care of, getting enough to eat, and getting basic necessities. But, of course, there is a lot more we could give them with more resources. For example, I could hire more qualified staff or build an extension to one of the buildings to create space for more children in the orphanage.

Lara: What have you learnt with your work with the orphans?

Ruth: I have learned to be more selfless—to think more about others and less about myself. I have also learned to appreciate every single individual. I have realized that the life of a big corporate president holds the same value as the life of a poor orphan. Everyone has dignity, pride and something to give, and we should always remember that.



Children of Sheltering Wings Orphanage

Interview of Sidwell Friends School Student Gabriel Singer

Lara: Please describe what your community service project entailed.

Gabe: My community service project took place in Zambia over the course of 18 days. It involved working at three schools, starting a garden, and building bicycles. We worked with the organizations Playpumps, and World Bicycle Relief. At Chikumbuso, the school where we worked first, we mostly played games and did arts and crafts type things with the kids, leaving all of our supplies behind for the kids. At Malambo school in Monze, a rural village south of Lusaka, we focused on academically-based activities. We made a generous financial donation to help the school repair its facilities, money which all of the participants on the trip had raised themselves. For the garden projects we worked with the Playpump to provide a playground toy which can pump enough water for an entire village to plant the seeds of a garden which will help the Chongwe community become more self-sustainable. Here we contributed enough money for all of the garden tools that the community will need to keep the garden in shape. Lastly, every member of the trip was able to purchase the parts of a bicycle, through World Bicycle Relief, parts which would become 32 sturdy bicycles to help HIV/AIDS caregivers transport medical supplies to homesick patients, as well as transport patients to the hospital if need be.

Lara: What was most rewarding for you?

Gabe: The most rewarding thing for me was being able to experience the total warmth and acceptance of another people, even when we come from such different backgrounds.

Lara: What was the most challenging aspect of your community service?

Gabe: The most challenging part of my community service project was leaving it all behind.

Lara: What lessons did you learn as a result of your community service?

Gabe: I have learned that you can never define whether someone is poor or not. Those that have very little in the way of food, land, and opportunities can live very richly.



Gabe in Lusaka, Zambia

Lara: Would you recommend it to others? If so, why? If not, why not?

Gabe: I would most definitely recommend the trip to others, but only if they are able to fully commit to the program, as the process is rather extensive. Before the trip, participants have to attend multiple meetings, as well as raise a minimum of 500 dollars as well as 50 pounds of items to donate. While there, it is so important that you are totally involved in what you are doing, and when you come back, it is important that each school team follows up with their action plan, or what they want to accomplish upon their return, as a result of what they learned and did in Africa. I would recommend it to others because, I know I have returned a stronger, more willing, more complete individual, and if you make the commitment there is no limit to what you can do for yourself and for others.

Tried and Tested Service Opportunities:

Kid Power DC: <http://www.kidpowerdc.org/>

Big Creek People in Action:
<http://www.bigcreekpeopleinaction.org/>

SOME: <http://www.some.org/>

Sheltering Wings: <http://www.shelteringwings-gifts.org/>

Playpumps: www.playpumps.org

World Bicycle Relief:
<http://www.worldbicyclerelief.org/>

For more information about these opportunities please email: lara@empower-through-service.org

Editor: Lara Mitra
lara@empower-through-service.org

Contributors: Ruth Cox, Richard Gerlach, Rose Howell, Gabriel Singer, Lark Toney

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