

FIRST PERSON

# BUILDING SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTRY I FLED



ILLUSTRATION BY CHELSEA O'BYRNE

With each brick cemented into place and each nail hammered, I thought about the kids who were now going to have a future, **Bassie Kargbo** writes

**M**y wife understands me very well. When I get that look on my face and my body sags and my mind is not where it should be, she says, “You need to go home, dear. Go. We can manage.”

And I go. I get my plane ticket, pack my suitcase, kiss my wife and children goodbye, and head back to Sierra Leone, the country I fled in 1999 when a war over diamonds decimated the land and left thousands dead.

There is something about a country that has been through a war. It divides people into two groups: those who face the sun and those who do not. There are those who want to move forward and leave the shadows of the past behind them, and there are others who turn their back to the sun and see only the horrors of the past.

I am of the former group. I am facing the sun.

The civil war in Sierra Leone lasted 11 years and destroyed many schools, leaving children without an education or a future. I have a future, and I have a wonderful family and a great life in Canada. It only seems right that I do what I can to help the people in my home country. Especially the children.

In 2009, 10 years after I fled, I decided it was time to rebuild and reclaim the life that we had before the war. With more than two-thirds of the schools destroyed, it was a mammoth task. But I began by focusing on one school at a time.

First, there was the school in Mburah village. My friend had called me: “Bassie,” he said, “life is terrible where I am teaching right now. The school has been nearly demolished. There is barely a roof over our heads.”

So, with the help of several charities and businesses, the organization I work with raised the \$15,000 we needed. The school was rebuilt and the children paid me with smiles. I consider that payment in full.

And it pushed me to do more.

I went to Kissi town, in the east end of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, in December of 2010 and my dreams grew. I looked upon an empty field and pictured a school that met all the needs of the children. Classrooms for all ages and grades, a playground, latrines ... my head almost exploded as I saw this vision. I felt like the man in the baseball movie: Build it and they will come.

And we built it.

With each brick that was cemented into place and each nail that was hammered, I thought about the kids who were now going to have a future. Workers and volunteers laboured day and night until, one month later, the school was complete.

When the school opened, it was packed, so we created two shifts, a morning and an afternoon shift, to fill the need.

Later, we put an addition onto the school, then in 2020 another five classrooms were added. But the need was still there so we added eight more class-

rooms in 2021. As each classroom was added, more children smiled. More payments in full.

After each school was built and I returned to Canada, my wife could see the transformation in me. I held my head a little higher and my back a little straighter because I knew good things were happening in my home country.

Sometimes this happy feeling would stay with me for months, sometimes even a year, but then something about my life here in Thunder Bay would take my mind back to the problems of Sierra Leone.

Sometimes, it was wandering the colourful aisles in the local grocery store that made me want to return. All that food, readily available, reminded me of the empty stomachs of the children overseas. Or sometimes it was the complaining I heard around me that made me want to go back: The weather wasn't just right, the lineup at the bank was too long or a flight had been postponed. As if these were things a person should complain about.

“Go,” my wife always said. “We can manage.”

So I'd return once again to build more schools, create more futures and see more happy children.

I'm back in Sierra Leone now because I have set my heart on building a vocational school. It will be a place where older students can learn computer skills, culinary skills, carpentry, bricklaying, welding, agriculture and sewing. The board of CanSerra, the organization where I work, are the people who have taken this journey with me. They pointed out it is a mountainous task. “Bassie,” they said, “we don't have the money. Not only is there the building, but there is the staff, the equipment, the salaries, the ...” I just shook my head and said, “It will happen. There are no problems. Only solutions.”

I remember the looks on their faces when I was able to tell them a large donation had come in to support the build. I never saw jaws drop so quickly.

I must admit despair has taken over my mind once or twice, but I have faith. And sometimes it is something small that can crush the biggest of problems. For example, we had only a month available to build that first school, and with so much to do, there were not enough hours in a day. Then a friend of mine, a retired army officer, sent over a generator and the solution fell into place. We started a night shift and people worked under the lights run by the generator.

The more you search for the solution, the more likely it will come your way. People will fall onto your pathway, and good things will often come out of these encounters.

I have met many people who have the same heart as me and want to see the smiles of children in Sierra Leone as much as I do. We all know how much a smile can sustain us: It is payment in full.

Bassie Kargbo lives in Thunder Bay.

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers

Have a story to tell? Please see the guidelines on our website [tgam.ca/essayguide](https://www.tgam.ca/essayguide), and e-mail it to [firstperson@globeandmail.com](mailto:firstperson@globeandmail.com)

TODAY'S SUDOKU SOLUTION

6	8	5	9	1	4	7	3	2
7	4	1	5	2	3	9	6	8
9	2	3	7	8	6	5	4	1
4	1	6	3	7	9	2	8	5
2	9	7	4	5	8	3	1	6
5	3	8	2	6	1	4	7	9
3	6	9	8	4	5	1	2	7
8	5	2	1	3	7	6	9	4
1	7	4	6	9	2	8	5	3

TODAY'S KENKEN SOLUTION

3-	2	5	5-	1	6	12x	4	3
4-	5	10+	30x	3	2	3	2-	1
1	4	4	5	3	5-	6	2	
2-	6	8+	4	4	1	1-	5	
4	3	3+	2	1	200x	5	6	
3	3	5-	1	6	5	2	4	

## Hot Docs to spotlight Inuit rights, Lac-Mégantic

TORONTO

**T**his year's Hot Docs festival will open with a portrait of Inuit activist Aaju Peter and include Oscar-nominated director Philippe Falardeau's four-part look at one of Canada's worst rail disasters.

The Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival has revealed a slate of 214 films from 72 countries, and will kick off with *Twice Colonized* from Danish director Lin Alluna, which centres on Greenlandic lawyer and human-rights advocate Peter.

Quebec filmmaker Falardeau, best known for dramas including *The Good Lie* with Reese Witherspoon and his Oscar-nominated classroom tear-jerker *Monsieur Lazhar*, will bring *Lac-Mégantic* to the Deep Dive program for long-form storytelling.

The Canadian Spectrum includes *I'm Just Here for The Riot*, about the “smartphone riot” that unfolded after the Vancouver Canucks lost the 2011 Stanley Cup final; *July Talk: Love Lives Here*, in which the band books a drive-in theatre amid the pandemic-born shutdown of live music; and *Someone Lives Here*, about a Toronto carpenter who builds shelters for unhoused people.

Canadian films in other programs include *Coven*, about three millennial women who identify as witches; *Satan Wants You*, about how a young woman and her Catholic psychiatrist ignited the global Satanic Panic in the 1980s with their bestselling memoir *Michelle Remembers*; and *The Lebanese Burger Mafia*, which chases clues through rural Alberta to uncover the origins of a rogue fast-food chain.

The 30th edition of Hot Docs runs April 27 to May 7 in Toronto.

“As Hot Docs has grown and evolved over the last 30 years, so too has the inventiveness, impact and craft of documentary filmmaking,” Hot Docs artistic director Shane Smith said Tuesday in a release that also touted 53 per cent female directors in the official selection.

The Big Ideas Series marks its 10th edition of conversations with celebrities by welcoming U.S. chef and food writer Ruth Reichl, Indigo Girls singer-songwriter Emily Saliers and fashion model and “revolutionary” Bethann Hardison.

New this year is a program dubbed Human Kind, highlighting stories of kindness and collaboration. The inaugural edition includes the world premieres of *The Only Doctor*, about the only doctor in Georgia's poorest county for 15 years, and *Unsyncable*, about a group of seniors with a passion for synchronized swimming.

Also new is the Hot Docs Podcast Festival Showcase, which will offer a taste of the organization's annual Podcast Festival, set to return for its seventh year this fall.

Five live events will feature WNYC Studios' Peabody Award-winning *Radiolab*; Wondery's hit series *Scamfluencers*, co-hosted by Canadian culture writers Scaachi Koul and Sarah Hagi; *The Story I Never Thought I Would Tell*, with CBC Podcasts hosts including Anna Maria Tremonti and Falen Johnston; *On With Kara Swisher* featuring Canadian YouTube comedian and author Lilly Singh; and *The Happiness Lab* with Dr. Laurie Santos, featuring author and podcaster Gretchen Rubin.

The Nightvision program includes the world premiere of *It's Coming*, a found-footage horror in which a woman returns to her family's ancestral apartment; and the international premiere of *Another Body*, in which a student investigates deepfake technology after pornographic video surfaces showing her face on another body.

The Special Presentations program includes the previously announced Kremlin exposé *The Rise of Wagner*; the story of the Indigenous guardians of the Brazilian Amazon, *We Are Guardians*; director Barry Avrich's *Without Precedent: The Supreme Life of Rosalie Abella*, a portrait of Canada's first female Jewish Supreme Court Justice; and a look at the posthumous theft of Albert Einstein's brain from award-winning Toronto journalist Michelle Shephard, with *The Man Who Stole Einstein's Brain*.

Outside Toronto, organizers say non-fiction fans can stream more than 100 selections May 5 to 9 on the online subscription platform Hot Docs at Home.

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