



WEST AFRICAN CHILDREN SUPPORT NETWORK

Newsletter 2004

Dear Friends of WACSN:

It has been quite a while since our generous supporters have received an update on our activities. We are pleased to announce that much progress has been made.

Let me first introduce myself. I am Heather Cannon-Winkelman, a volunteer board member and newsletter editor with West African Children Support Network (WACSN) since it began in 1995. I want to review with you both our organizational mission and the considerable accomplishments related to that mission. Also, I'll provide some background about the nation of Liberia.

Mission Statement:

West African Children Support Network (WACSN) is a 501(c)3 organization that is registered and incorporated in the State of Minnesota and the Republic of Liberia. Established in 1995, WACSN is dedicated to the rehabilitation of orphans and abandoned children in West African countries ravaged by war. Our vision is the development of alliances and collaborations with existing organizations to improve the lives of those we serve, especially children and mothers living in difficult economic circumstances.

Related Accomplishments to date:

In 1997, a small delegation headed by WACSN founder and executive director Maria Luyken self-financed a trip to Liberia, West Africa. Their purpose was to assess first-hand the scope of services needed by children victimized by civil war. Maria, a Liberian by birth, met with local organizations and identified priority areas needing action. She set to work finding resources in Liberia, the United States, and Europe to meet those needs. Ever since, she has personally supervised the packing, shipping, unpacking and disbursement of all donated articles.

In 1998, my husband Leo and I accompanied Maria and her husband John on a humanitarian visit, each of us paying 100% of our travel expenses. We brought with us donated relief supplies, including food and first aid items. On site, we purchased rice, dried fish and farming tools, and distributed them to the primary groups: Cheshire Home, Fatima Orphanage and Pipeline Road School.

In the years since 1998, Maria and many volunteers have assembled and shipped over 50 forty-foot cargo containers of donated goods to sustain our initial relief efforts. Shipments

thus far have included tents, food, clothing, medical, school supplies, agricultural supplies and medication.

Based on Maria's ongoing needs assessments, conducted each time she has returned to Liberia, several programs are up and running, to assist war-weary children and their mothers. Among these are:

- Children's feeding centers in Monrovia, capital city of Liberia.
- Food, clothing, and educational supplies provided to existing Liberian orphanages
- 29 safe water wells constructed in rural areas to improve health and sanitation
- Donated medical supplies delivered to area hospitals
- Scholarship programs funded for elementary through high school education.
- Adoption services linking infants of teen Liberian mothers with American families.

We have successfully partnered with the following support organizations.

- IDA (International Dispensary Association), The Netherlands
- Convoy of Hope, Missouri - food
- Hope for the City, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Out Reach Ministries, Oklahoma
- Hutterian Brethren of Gibbon, Minnesota
- Feed My Starving Children, Plymouth, Minnesota
- World Concern, Seattle, Washington
- Feeding Children International, New Hope, Minnesota
- Nehemiah Partners, Edina, Minnesota



Page 2

A Personal Memoir.....page 2

Behind The Organization...page 3

Liberians In Minnesota.....page 3

How You Can Help.....page 4



Please Support WACSN's Mission to Save Children's Lives

Liberia is among the poorest countries in the world, and faces a staggering humanitarian crisis. WACSN's increasingly successful work there hinges on the regular transportation of donated supplies and materials. Maria's personal, onsite monitoring of the distribution is essential to maintaining the integrity of the whole process. The Luyken family have thus far footed all transportation expenses. They can no longer bear this burden.

Your support is urgently needed to support these costs:

- \$7,000 to \$9,000 per shipping container
- \$1,400 for Maria's round trip airfare.

The Luyken's have footed the costs for this increasingly successful humanitarian, non-governmental organization. Please step forward with a tax-deductible donation. Please make checks payable to WACSN, and mail to this address:

West African Children Support Network, Inc
6678 Kara Drive
Eden Prairie, MN 55346

Special Thanks to the continued efforts and support given by Paul Ehlen, Feed My Starving Children and the Hutterian Brethren.

Preparation and distribution of this Newsletter is an in-kind contribution of Heather and Leo Winkelman and LionArt™ Design
Lakeville, Minnesota U.S.A.

West African Children Support Network

6678 Kara Drive

Eden Prairie, Minnesota 55346

Place
Stamp
Here





A Personal Memoir of an Unforgettable Site Visit

In October 1998, Maria, John, Leo and I left for Africa as a delegation for WACSN. This was the first time Leo and I had visited the African continent. We had three main objectives for this trip: to deliver relief supplies, medicine and food to locations where shelter was being provided for orphaned and abandoned children; legalize the WACSN organization in Liberia; and inspect possible sites to set up permanent operations.

The war had severely damaged Liberia's infrastructure, rendering the airport incapable of handling the arrival of international commercial airliners. Our flight was therefore diverted to the airport in neighboring Ivory Coast, where five containers of supplies we brought with us were quickly confiscated by the police. It took eight days to clear the items before we traveled on to Liberia. As a precaution against the real threat of rebel attacks, we decided against taking a small commuter flight to Monrovia, and traveled instead along unpaved and extremely bumpy roads under the cover of night.

We crossed Liberia's border sometime after midnight on the second night of our journey. As we got closer to Monrovia, we started noticing all of the dilapidated buildings. Every where you turned, the homeless and impoverished were evident. Many displaced Liberian had taken up residence in unsafe abandoned buildings. Their wet laundry was spread out on the ground or hanging over blown-out windows to air dry.

The following day we began distributing the relief supplies to entities already providing support for the children. We inquired about their food needs, purchased it from local vendors, and made personal deliveries to those same sites. The numbers of homeless children were heartbreaking, particularly because we didn't have enough resources to feed them all.

We visited a school that had been started by six university students, with an enrollment of 150 or 200 pupils. They invited us to their school program the following day, for which we provided the food. The children sang songs and performed skits for us, and one boy recited the Emancipation Proclamation perfectly. Leo and I started to cry, feeling both honored and humbled by this experience. As Leo began taking pictures of some children, a loud roar erupted behind him. The rest of the children were rushing up to get into the photos. Their delight at being photographed sparked some spontaneous singing and the display of big grins. These same children had noticeable signs of malnutrition, such as the bloated stomachs and hair that was turning red. The hospitality accorded to us came



Copyright © 2004 West African Children Support Network

Children being photographed sparked some spontaneous singing and the display of big grins.



Copyright © 2004 West African Children Support Network

These Liberian men stop for a moment while digging one of our water wells to provide clean and safe drinking water.

out of great human courage. People who had lost everything during the war welcomed us to their barely habitable homes, offering us food and drink. Despite having no running water or electricity, they hoped for a better future.

The mood of our whole trip was one of sweet sorrow. One minute we would light up a child's face by providing them with food or clothes, and next minute we had to passover other equally needy children who we could not help. We became close to the young men who were our guides and protectors throughout the visit; many were former child soldiers. They shared their stories of survival during a time when children could no longer be children. Many now have families of their own, and are trying to provide this next generation a better life.

It was hard saying goodbye to the new friends we shared so much with over the space of a few weeks. The above reminiscences are only part of our whole experience. We plan to return to Liberia, now that things have stabilized.



The Person Behind The Organization

Our success is clearly attributable to Maria Luyken's hard work and dedication. Over the past seven years she has maintained a "hands-on" commitment to WACSN. In fact, Maria and John Luyken have been the main financial supporters for the organization's efforts.

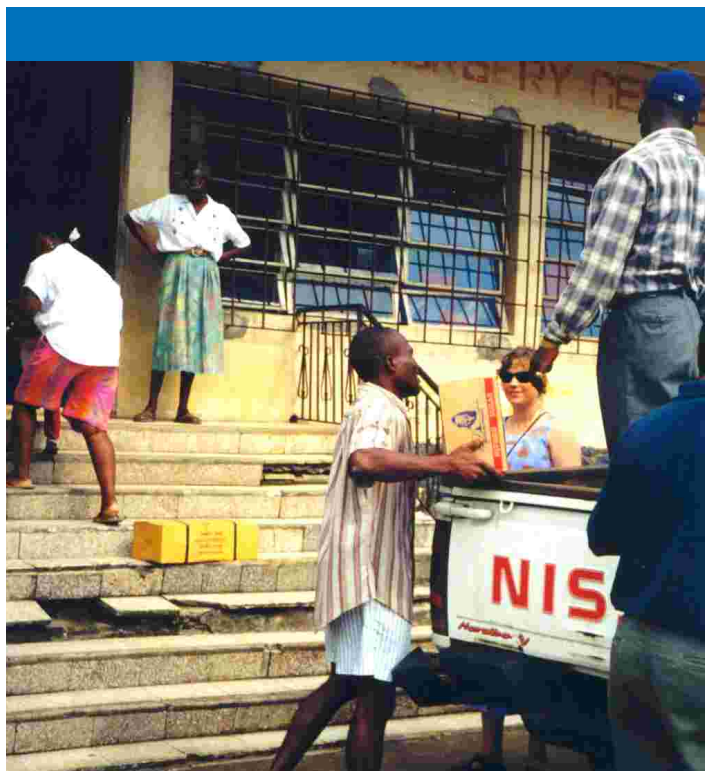
One of our main objectives is to ensure that a WACSN representative is present whenever shipments arrive, and oversee the distribution of supplies. Maria has been that person every time. She travels to Liberia two or three times a year, for stays of four or more months. She devotes her time, energy, and personal finances to ensuring the integrity of our projects. She travels around the country during each visit, assessing whether current projects are matched to the actual needs. She has risked a great deal, making sure the basic necessities of food, clean water, shelter and medical care are provided to children adversely affected by the past and recent atrocities of war.

Recent Events In Liberia and Our Evolving Service Role

The most recent fighting displaced thousands of Liberians in Monrovia. Again, most of victims are the children. Many died each day from hunger, disease and exposure. In response, in 2003 we increased our commitment to the **feeding of 3,000 children per**



Maria Luyken interacting with homeless and orphaned children at a local feeding center.



We began distributing relief supplies to entities already providing support for the children, Heather Cannon-Winkelman is pictured near the vehicle.

day. We have recently opened an **adoption center**, to match orphans and abandoned children with loving families. To date, we have identified American adoptive families for 28 children. Fourteen youngsters are already living in their new homes, and the remainder are scheduled to be placed with their new parents within two or three months. We also remain hopeful that many American families would step forward to adopt a child through our organization.

After the last round of fighting had ceased, UN troops peacekeeping forces were warmly welcomed by Liberians. The leadership of Jack Kline --- an American and UN Ambassador to Liberia -- has produced more affordable prices for goods and services. The war-torn nation is ripe for rebuilding, providing opportunities for contractors to restore the damaged infrastructure, including the hydro plant. Restored confidence in Liberia's future has led to the reopening by other nations of their long-abandoned embassies in Monrovia.

With peace at hand, WACSN will now move ahead on the long-delayed **establishment of a Farm School**, to teach young people some tools in becoming self-sufficient.

Liberians In Minnesota

Minnesota has become a home base for 40,000 Liberians who fled the wars. As a group, they have received no tax benefits nor concessions when they chose Minnesota as their home. They work for others or are self-employed business owners. Their children attend public schools, and they participate widely in the state's economy. These relationships constitute an ideal partnership for Minnesotans and Liberians.

If you would like more information or have questions regarding our programs, please email Heather Cannon-Winkelman at heathercw@charter.net.