



April 3, 2008

Hello all

We are safely back from our recent trip to Sierra Leone. My, oh my, what a trip.

Travel to London was good. We found Robin in the London airport, and seeing her was even better than I expected. We had worked together in Senegal, where I developed a real fondness and respect for her. She is a great asset to our team.

Our flight left London late. Chris and I had checked 8 bags in San Francisco; only 7 arrived at Lungi airport near Freetown. By the time I filled out the paperwork, we had missed the last ferry between the airport and Freetown. This could have been a disaster, except for our Ms Jitta's resourcefulness. When she had heard the air traffic controller announce that our flight would be late, she approached him for more information, which led to an offer of a place for us to stay. So, we spent the night at the home of this very generous man and his wife. They thought that surrendering their bed and their son's bed to strangers was an extremely normal thing to do. We were humbled and grateful.

As we hurried to the ferry the next morning, our rented vehicle was making some odd noises. We stopped, hailed a passing taxi and piled into it; we had to run down the ramp to the ferry and barely made it in time. On the ferry, Robin and Jitta were talking and laughing (they are about 3 months apart in age; as much as Jitta loves her mamies, she really enjoyed having a contemporary around!). It was then that I discovered that my camera was crunched very badly. So I was not able to take any pictures this trip. Our original vehicle took the next ferry and showed up at the house with our baggage a few hours later.

So we settled in for a few days, adjusting to the time change (8 hours), the heat and the pace of life. (And getting the lost bag.) Jitta, Tiangay, and Alice all had examinations, so we coached them for their tests. And all did well – Alice, Jitta's daughter, emerged as #1 in her class! We did sneak off to the beach, to float mindlessly in the ocean and scarf down fresh grilled fish.

Then upcountry. We made the trip to Daru in one very long day. On the trip, the roof rack holding our luggage broke, causing the luggage to slide down the windshield. Our driver was relieved and disconcerted that we were howling with laughter. After reloading the bags, we were on our way. We made one more stop, during which the front bumper joined the roof rack in the back of the vehicle. Our poor driver spent the night repairing and washing the car, while we chatted with Paramount Chief (PC) Kallon. He provided Robin with her Mende name: She is now Miatta Kallon, joining Sallay (Chris) and Jebbeh (me) as his sisters.

Sallay then took the painful trip to Kailahun town (2 hours to go about 40 miles) to meet with the District Medical Officer. She learned that NGOs are supposed to register with the government, and we could not teach again until we did. This was an astonishing and discouraging bit of news. The PC calmed us, made some phone calls, and got us an appointment with some very helpful officials. We met with the women and elders of Daru, who were even more disappointed than we that we had to cancel the class. And off we went, back to Freetown.



We met with many of the same officials we'd talked to on earlier trips. But a significant change has taken place with the change of government. Instead of our being sent off to try to find someone and make an appointment, Deputy Ministers and others made the appointments and accompanied us to the meetings. We got a booklet, dated 2004, with explicit directions for registering as an NGO. One senior official called a Member of Parliament to set up an appointment for us, and she called in some of her colleagues. We were invited to attend task force meetings at the national and the district levels.

We scrambled to collect the needed documentation. However, some documents were only in hard copy, locked in the filing cabinets in the office in San Francisco. So we left with the process unfinished, but the Deputy Minister has called Jitta to make sure we don't get discouraged. We sent pdf copies of the documents to Jitta, who will finish the process. Our Board of Directors must include someone from Sierra Leone. And the Board just voted to install PC Kallon; with that documentation we are ready to submit the complete application!

With all this, everyone we spoke to said that our work is critical and is in keeping with the direction they want to go. They have documented a three-year strategy for improving maternity care, and much of this reads just like our original recommendations. They are very supportive and are anxious for us to become official, and return and begin teaching. So, all in all, these results are very good. We're on better terms with more senior government officials and all are in synch.

We did make another trip upcountry, to visit our friends in Pellie who were bitterly disappointed that we had to cancel the refresher training. Of the 62 women we taught last summer, over 40 came to see us the day we were there, some walking 2 hours to Pellie, spending an hour with us, then walking home to a full day's work. The village and the TBAs warmly welcomed Miatta.

The TBAs crowded into our kitchen courtyard to talk with us. They asked Miatta to dance with them – they said they knew Sallay and I could dance, but needed to check out her skills. So, as they clapped and sang, she danced with them. The women cheered and applauded – Miatta was accepted. And we all danced and sang and shared. Our goddaughters were also presented to us. They are beautiful girls, about 9 months old.

We left Pellie sadly, and went on to tour three other villages, in chiefdoms to the north of Jawei – Jokibu, Foindu, and Pujehun. They held town meetings to hear what we were doing and to invite us to come and teach. We enjoyed meeting these people and hope to return to teach there soon. We especially liked Foindu, as it seemed to "feel" a lot like Pellie.

We also went back to Kailahun town, to attend a task force meeting. We kept very quiet, observing the dynamics. Attending were the local Members of Parliament, a representative of the Paramount Chiefs of the district, a representative of the District Council, several members of the Ministry of Health, and several NGOs. The discussion was very open and fruitful – this was the first time a meeting like this had ever been held. We were complemented by the Ministry of Health for the work we were doing, so that felt very good. We met again with the District Medical Officer, who was very pleased about our progress toward registration.



We also met the president of a national NGO, MAGE: Male Association for Gender Equity, who is working to educate men about the importance and right treatment of women. MAGE is doing impressive work in the Kailahun district.

After passing the night in Daru, we were off to Freetown.

Unfortunately, this driver of our rented Land Rover Defender did not avoid a motorcyclist, hitting the bike head on. No one was injured, miraculously. But I was just about ready to kill our driver by the time we got everything settled. We spent an hour on the side of the road, then two more hours in the police station. After a series of conversations, the police released the driver, our car, and us.

All of us, Jitta, Miatta, Sallay, and I, had had dreams where we were in accidents or were killed. When we called Jitta to tell her about our delay on the road, she was very upset. When we arrived at home, she checked us all over to make sure we were OK.

We rested after this second journey upcountry for a day or two, then headed for the ferry for the crossing to the airport. All went well, and our flight left on time. As we prepared to board the second plane, in London, the gate agent said that our seats had been changed. We were so disappointed. Then we discovered we had a free upgrade to first class! All the way down the gangway, we said "Thank God" in every language we knew. We nestled down into our beds, sipped champagne and dozed. At one point, we discussed whether we had indeed been killed and were in heaven. Although we decided that wasn't so, we certainly were thrilled with our surroundings. We arrived in San Francisco feeling rested and ache-free.

So, we are beginning to plan, with our friends in the Ministry of Health, our next set of courses. We are aiming for either November or late January for the next trip, and hope to work with two sites: The refresher in Pellie and either Daru or Foindu.

I haven't yet updated the web site with this information, but am aiming to do that today or tomorrow.

As always, we are anxious to hear your comments and questions. Please email or call to share your ideas or concerns. And if you want to help us in any way, let us know. So many of you have been so generous – and you should have seen the light in the faces of the women of Pellie and Daru when we shared your gifts and described how you care about them and their lives.

Obviously, they are thrilled with the baby blankets, the instruments and the teaching supplies we bring. But when we tell them about you, how you listen to the stories we share, your questions about their lives, and the concern you show, they become very solemn. They ask how it could be that you, who have such full lives, can find time to think about them, and find room in your hearts to give so generously. We tell them that you are good people.

Thank you.

Trish Ross

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