



THE JUICE BAR

# LIGHTING THE WAY

EMPOWERING A VILLAGE TO BUILD FROM WITHIN

WORDS: BRITTNEY M. WALKER

When Ebola hit Sierra Leone, the village of Bongema was devastated for the second time in its history. After being ravaged by the country's eleven-year civil war here was a new plight. Children couldn't play outside, go to school or touch their loved ones. Spirits were crushed and the health of the community was dwindling.

Tiffany Persons is the founder of the non-profit organization Shine On Sierra Leone (SOSL) and owner of the commercial casting agency Tiffany Company Casting. In 2006, Persons was inspired to produce a documentary film about the burgeoning issues the country was facing after the civil war, which stemmed from the control of "blood diamonds." During her three-month stay, she stumbled upon Bongema, a community of a few thousand people, where despair robbed the locals of a viable future. Eager to relieve the pain, Persons, who lives in Los Angeles with her daughter and partner-in-joy, November Skyy, shifted her focus and she began to give all she had to this ancestral land.

SOSL is dedicated to empowering the people of the country through education of self. Persons believes the savior mentality is outdated and ineffective. Instead, she says community partnerships and self-journeying are more powerful ways to increase spiritual, mental and communal wealth.

Today, in Sierra Leone, the average individual over the age of 25 has received less than three years of schooling. The typical junior high school classroom is filled with approximately 54 students and, as a result of extreme overcrowding, may implement a "shift system," educating children in two rotations with each group receiving instruction for only one-half of the day. Between Sierra Leone's civil war and the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the country now confronts an immense shortage of teachers. The Sierra Leonean government will need to increase capacity by 54% to achieve the country's goal of universal primary school education.

Desperate not to return to their condition of dependence, Persons reminded local leaders that the power comes from within the community to restore mental and physical health. The people of Bongema did not receive suffi-

cient aid from outside organizations. But after utilizing their local resources, the village managed to thrive greater than they had before the virus. Persons believes that this is a testament of real transformation.

At the center of this village was a dilapidated school without a roof. Despite its condition and torrential rains, every morning hundreds of uniformed children would emerge from their homes to file inside for lessons from a couple of volunteer teachers. Heartbroken but inspired, Persons stepped into action and recruited some of her influential friends, including award-winning photographer, adventurer and philanthropist, Sebastian Copeland, to raise \$5,000 for the non-profit's first project, rebuilding the school.

With the new building, there was hope, but it didn't inspire the community to be self-sustaining. Children were still begging, chasing after cars and shouting to outsiders, "White man, white man, give me money," says Persons. Something needed to change.

"When I started SOSL, I started to look around me and say I'm not really living the life I want to live, but why am I not living the life I want to live. I tried the idea of literally shifting my mindset by not focusing on the things I didn't want and only focusing on what I wanted," she says. "My daily mantra was about feeling good. When I became happy for the sake of being happy everything shifted."

She went from being a single mother struggling to make ends meet to being one of the industry's top casting directors with a blossoming business. She recognized she had the power to shift her reality. Persons wanted to liberate her Sierra Leonean family with this new knowledge.

"We want to reconnect people to the power they have within themselves," Persons declares.

The non-profit went from being a charity to a partnership by incorporating local workers to get the job done. While the school, Muddy Lotus, provides free education and needed resources for the village, SOSL created a new curriculum that focuses on holistic education, teaching children to love from the inside out. With daily affirmations and programs about self worth, the children's countenances have brightened and they stand a little taller, according to Persons.

Within five years, the school went from being ranked 736 out of 736 to number five in the region. Not only did test scores improve, but also locals started to glean to their individual strength to improve their collective condition. Prior to finding her calling in Sierra Leone Persons was in search of something fulfilling. She's passionate about her work there and good at what she does in the entertainment world. She didn't expect it, but with both she's discovered a balance.

"Do not condemn what you're doing (because it) is such a beautiful and important piece of what you are set to do in your life," says Persons. She advises, "Honor all the knowledge you've gained. It's not for not. It's really about taking your time and being authentic with the people around you. If [you] focus on the things that bring joy, things will come into place."

Persons runs a 10-year-old casting firm specializing in bringing everyday people to the screen. Some of her clients include AT&T, Apple, Kellogg's, Johnson & Johnson's baby products and Best Buy, to name a few.

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