

KOO-SHEH ISAIAH'S STORY

Koo-sheh Isaiah's Story

Isaiah Lahai with Keiron Galloway

Keiron gratefully acknowledges the support of 26TEN and TCAL



First published: Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy 2015

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Authors: Isaiah Lahai with Keiron Galloway

Illustrator: Keiron Galloway

Photography: Isaiah Lahai

Map design: Keiron Galloway and Steve Cooke

Title: Koo-sheh – Isaiah's Story

ISBN: 978-0-9924881-3-0

Kindle eBook ISBN: 978-0-9924881-4-7

ePub ISBN: 978-0-9924881-5-4

Publication date: November 2015

Subjects: Adult Learning, Adult Literacy, Refugee Stories, Biography

Cover image and graphics: Keiron Galloway

Cover design: Isabel Galloway and Matthew Dunn

Book design: Keiron Galloway, Isabel Galloway and Matthew Dunn

Printing by NewPrint, Kingston

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors and creators and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy nor of any of the institutions and agencies cited in this publication.

Koo-sheh Isaiah's Story

It was fear that urged us on,
Hacking at our hearts,
Fear of the demented power,
That fed upon its own illusions...

Patrick Purnell SJ – *"Refugees"*

Dear Isaiah,
May you and your family be well and happy
and may all your dreams for a new life come true.



Isaiah's Story

"This is how refugees run away – it is not like being a migrant. They are going, not because they want to, but because of things beyond their control... fear of killing, fear of death... fear of persecution and torture."
– Isaiah Lahai

Fayia Isaiah Lahai was only 14 years old when war broke out in his homeland, Sierra Leone. One day he came home to find his family and neighbours missing; they had fled their homes in fear for their lives and it took Isaiah a whole day of running to catch up with them. Isaiah spent the next 14 years with his family in five different refugee camps before finally being able to migrate to Australia in 2006.

Isaiah is a strong believer in contributing to the community and has immense faith in God. He is a proud family man with one wife (polygamy is legal and normal in Sierra Leone) and five children. Sadly, one daughter died in a refugee camp.

Despite Isaiah's education being interrupted by the civil war in Sierra Leone, he has attained a university degree in social work at the University of Tasmania, with several awards for academic excellence. This is a remarkable achievement, given that English is not Isaiah's first, second or even third language, and that there was no formal education in the refugee camps.

Isaiah is also a committed and active advocate for a multicultural and socially inclusive Australia, free of racism. He has been awarded several highly deserved national medals and community honours for his advocacy work with refugees, volunteer work with various organisations, and work with State and Federal Government multicultural advisory and policy boards.



Isaiah and family in the refugee camp in Africa



Isaiah sick in the refugee camp

Sierra Leone And Civil War

"The root of the conflict is and remains diamonds, diamonds and diamonds."

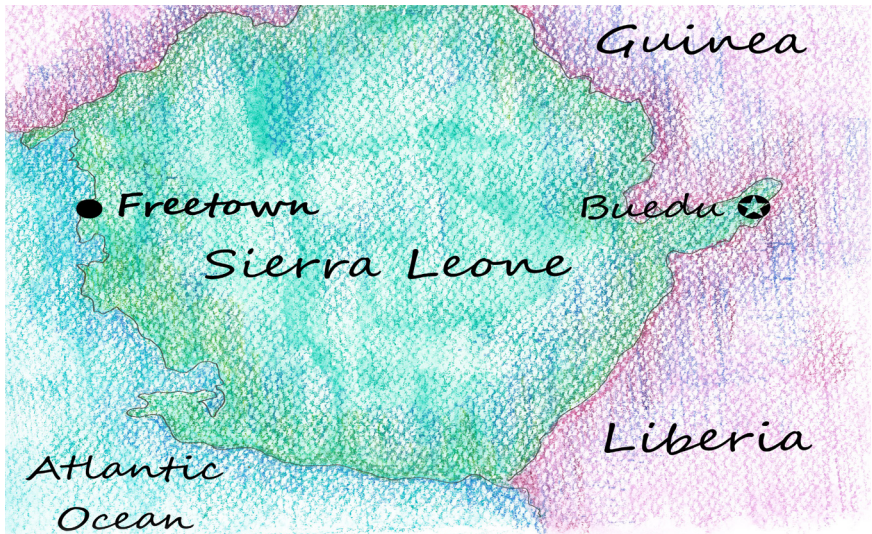
– Ibrahim Kamara

Sierra Leone is located on the West Coast of Africa. It is bordered by Guinea in the northeast, Liberia in the southeast and the Atlantic Ocean to the southwest. Sierra Leone has a tropical climate with a diverse environment ranging from savannah to rainforest. Sierra Leone has a total area of 71,740 km² and an estimated population of 6 million people.

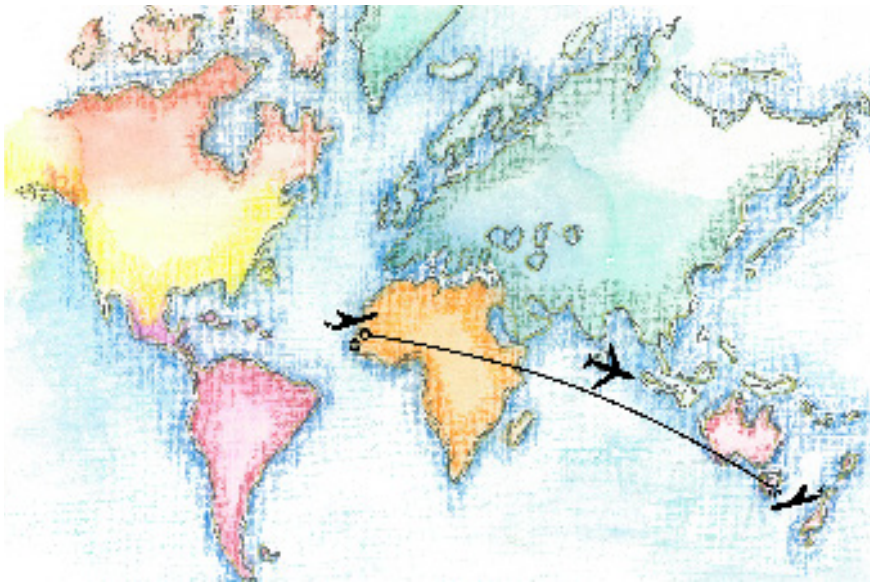
Sierra Leone is a country blessed with many resources: ample rainforest, clean water, arable land and gemstones. Civil war erupted on 23 March 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rose up against the Government of Sierra Leone. The civil war lasted for over a decade and was funded by the sale of diamonds.

In the course of capturing and controlling the lucrative diamond producing regions, many people were brutally injured and murdered, frequently being butchered by machetes. The gruesome civil war enveloped the entire country and left over 50,000 dead. The diamonds became known as blood diamonds.

More than 2 million people (well over one third of the population) were displaced internally and externally. With help from the UN peacekeeping operation and the British Military intervention, the civil war was finally declared over on 11 January 2002.



Map of Sierra Leone



Isaiah's journey to Australia

Asylum In Australia

"This must surely be second heaven!"

– Isaiah Lahai

Isaiah and his family applied for third country resettlement in Australia. Isaiah's sister Hawa was already living in Tasmania. However, Isaiah's eldest daughter, Esther, had a problem with her heart and did not have her visa approved. Isaiah and his wife Lovet would not leave Esther. Finally, after Hawa agreed to be responsible for Esther's medical expenses, her visa was approved. Esther still remembers how happy her father and her family were the day they received the letter saying they could come to Australia.

In 2006, Isaiah and his family moved to Australia. When he saw Sydney from the plane window, Isaiah said to his wife that they had reached second heaven. Isaiah and his family were very grateful for the opportunity for a new life, but it was not easy. They had to learn English. They had to cope with cultural differences. The cold climate was also a challenge.

When Isaiah first arrived in Tasmania, he drove taxis to support his family. He had positive and negative experiences. Twice, Isaiah was racially abused by passengers. In one instance, he was bashed because of the colour of his skin. The perpetrators, two brothers, were found guilty; one went to jail for nine months and the other had his sentence suspended. Isaiah was left scarred and frightened by the attack. He could not continue to drive taxis because of the trauma.

This incident did not make Isaiah bitter or angry. It made him more determined and committed to his mission to create a peaceful, multicultural, socially inclusive Tasmania that is a model to the rest of Australia.



Isaiah and Esther in hospital in Melbourne in 2007



Isaiah and family, final moments in Africa

Left But Not Forgotten

"Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world."

– Nelson Mandela

Although Isaiah has migrated from his homeland, Sierra Leone, to the other side of the world, he has not forgotten the plight of his countrymen. During the recent Ebola crisis in West Africa, in which 10,000 people died, Isaiah raised funds and donations of much needed medical supplies, which were shipped to Africa. Isaiah and his family have also raised money to build and run a school in his hometown.

Isaiah believes that education is a basic human right and that education will allow his African brothers and sisters to reach their potential and realise their dreams. He strongly believes that education is the key to a successful future for the children of Sierra Leone. Opportunities for education are still limited, particularly in Isaiah's hometown Buedu and the surrounding areas. Isaiah undertook a sponsorship project to build a school in Buedu.

The Aladurrah Primary School Project commenced in 2012 and was funded with Isaiah's taxi earnings and donations. So far the project has built five classrooms that house approximately 200 children. Eighty percent of the children are orphans. Isaiah's father and the Buedu community currently manage the project. They employ five teachers.

Isaiah's goal is to expand the school to include vocational education, including carpentry, masonry, tailoring and baking.



Isaiah's school project in Sierra Leone



Beds for Ebola campaign

Advocacy and Leadership

In the refugee camps, Isaiah was always a strong leader and cared for his parents, siblings and others. Since his arrival in Australia, Isaiah has been a strong advocate and leader in the African and multicultural community in Tasmania and Australia. He is an active member of a range of community councils promoting social inclusion, diversity and multiculturalism.

Isaiah has also led and participated in the Human Library program. This involves visiting schools, aged care homes and other organisations to share stories and experiences. When Isaiah visits and speaks at schools and community groups, his mission is to educate the community about the prevalence and dangers of racism as well as the benefits of diversity and social harmony.

The first school that Isaiah visited was in the outer Hobart suburb of Bridgewater. Isaiah said the children had never seen a black person in their school before. He then realised he could really touch the lives of those children. He engaged them by sharing his story and encouraged them to understand his belief that all humans are created equal in the image and likeness of God. He believes that all humans should embrace and welcome each other.

In 2014, Isaiah was awarded the Citizen of the Year Award in Tasmania for his commitment toward social inclusion and diversity. He also won the Pride of Australia 2014 Tasmanian Award in the Fair Go category.



Isaiah and school kids in Tasmania



Isaiah received the Citizen of the Year Award in Tasmania, 2014

The Future

"My hope and prayer is to live in a society where my children will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character."

– Isaiah Lahai

Isaiah has five children, Esther, Ruth, Andrea, Isaiah Junior and Sarah. He and his wife Lovet work hard to provide their children with a good education and strong values. Isaiah adores his wife and children and wants only the best for them.

In the relatively short time that Isaiah has been in Tasmania he has made an enormous contribution to the community. He has worked hard to educate himself and his family. He has contributed his skills and experience to many forums. He has tirelessly promoted social inclusion, diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance and equality whilst suffering as the victim of bullying and racial attacks.

Despite growing up in a world of war and trauma and not obtaining a foundation education, Isaiah completed his degree in social work gaining academic honours. His goal and desire is to work in Tasmania in the field in which he is so eminently qualified, experienced and apprenticed. Despite his contribution and achievements, Isaiah has not been able to secure a permanent job in Tasmania. He is currently doing social work in Victoria and is making plans to move his family.

Isaiah is very grateful and thankful that he has been able to contribute to the Tasmanian society and that his efforts have made a difference to the history of Tasmania. Isaiah thanks the Tasmanian and greater Australian community for giving him and his family a second chance for a brighter future.

"A better and greater Australia is the responsibility of all Australians and I believe that if Australia is to be a better place, I have a part to play in the building of it."

– Isaiah Lahai



*Isaiah and his wife Lovet with former Governor-General of Australia
Quentin Bryce*



Isaiah and his family

Resource List

International Organization for Migration (IOM)
www.iom.int

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
www.unhcr.org

Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL)
www.tcal.org.au

The Department of Education Tasmania
www.education.tas.gov.au

TasTAFE
www.tastafe.tas.edu.au

26TEN
www.26ten.tas.gov.au

Migrant Resource Centre
www.mrchobart.org.au

Refugee Council of Australia
www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Keiron Galloway and the Namste Book Series
www.keirongalloway.com.au

For information about Isaiah Lahai and to donate to the Aladurrah School Project
www.isaiahlahai.com

Isaiah's Story is the fifth book
in the Namaste Book Series.

This book tells Isaiah's story
of his journey from Sierra Leone to Australia.

