



Giving Voice, Restoring Dignity

By Greg Chandler

Twelve years had passed since Dr. Ernest Cole fled his native Sierra Leone in the wake of a bloody civil war.

When Dr. Cole, an assistant professor of English at Hope, returned to the western African nation in the summer of 2009, he sought to document the experiences of survivors who had arms, legs, or hands amputated by anti-government rebels during the decade-long civil war.



In sharing the stories of the amputee survivors of Sierra Leone's civil war, Dr. Ernest Cole hopes to see new opportunities for their active involvement in society—a crucial need not only for them as individuals but in preventing further violence. Such engagement can take many forms, such as a popular soccer league that has even provided opportunities for travel for the participants.

So Dr. Cole went to “resettlement camps” that had been set up outside the capital city, where many of those survivors have been relocated. With a small video camera in hand, he captured the stories and living conditions of about 50 survivors – including a former customs officer who was attacked by rebels on his way to work and had his arms cut off with machetes. When the man’s son tried to stop the attack, he was shot to death.

“I’d go back (after interviewing a survivor), and I couldn’t sleep at night,” Dr. Cole said.

As Sierra Leone tries to get back on its feet after the war, Dr. Cole is concerned that those who lost limbs during the conflict are being forgotten about by the government. Many are dealing with both physical and emotional after effects of their experience. Dr. Cole hopes by sharing their stories, those survivors will not only get the help they need, but also find a way to reclaim their dignity and eventually, learn to forgive what happened to them.

“Somebody has to do it, to go back to give these people a voice,” Dr. Cole said. “We must break the silence. These people must be given back their voice.”

Ultimately, he hopes to see opportunities for the amputees to become active participants in society, a crucial need, he feels, not only for them as individuals but in preventing further violence.

“The message the attackers are inscribing on the individual is that you are dependent, you have no hope,” Dr. Cole said. “The



Dr. Ernest Cole's concern for those maimed during the 1991-2002 civil war in his native Sierra Leone has led him back to the country to help tell their story. His research project has provided a prime learning opportunity for Hope students through the college's emphasis on using new and emerging technologies to enhance scholarship in the arts and humanities. Dr. Cole is pictured with senior Carl Dunker and junior Kylen Blom reviewing footage he shot during his recent visit to the country.

amputee soon begins to see himself through images of guilt, humiliation, anger, and before you know it, revenge.”

“If they can be made functional again, they can go back and provide for their families. They’ll reclaim their dignity, they will reclaim their humanity, and above all, they will be able to forgive,” Dr. Cole said.

Dr. Cole’s work is part of a pilot project at Hope in what is described as the “digital humanities.” While Dr. Cole is putting together materials for future courses at Hope based on his Sierra Leone experience, five students at the college are going through his video footage and putting together a long-form documentary and other multimedia presentations that can be used to educate faculty and students alike. A three-minute introductory video, using footage from Dr. Cole’s visit, can be found on the video-sharing website YouTube.

“It’s certainly made me much more aware of human rights issues in Africa,” said Carl Dunker, a Hope senior from Bloomfield Hills, Mich., who is one of the students who have spent countless hours editing interviews and converting Dr. Cole’s videos into a digital

product. “I never realized how bad it was or really what went on. It’s something you don’t hear about on the news.”

Dr. Cole’s project is an example of the kind of work Hope students will have an opportunity to take part in through the college’s new Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Scholars Program in the Arts and Humanities.

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The program, which began this fall with 17 sophomore students, is designed to deepen students’ scholarship in the arts and humanities through collaborative, interdisciplinary research projects and the use of digital technologies, said Dr. William Pannapacker, associate professor of English at Hope and director of the Mellon program.

“This gives us an opportunity to formalize research programs for students interested in the arts and humanities,” Dr. Pannapacker said.

The program, which was established with the help of a three-year, \$200,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded last year, will enable select Hope students to develop research projects with faculty mentors, with a particular emphasis on teaching students how to use digital technologies for developing, disseminating and preserving their work.

The Mellon Scholars Program begins in the students’ sophomore year with a two-semester interdisciplinary course that will emphasize the development of traditional liberal arts skills, such as collaborative research and scholarly writing. In the second semester of the course, the students are introduced to developing

digital skills such as producing podcasts and editing videos. The goal, Dr. Pannapacker says, is to open up opportunities for students to share their research with larger audiences.

“There’s an understanding here at Hope that the traditional liberal arts are foundational. They don’t change,” Dr. Pannapacker said. “But there are new technologies that have made those traditional skills much more powerful than they ever were before.”

Faculty from each of the departments within the arts and humanities will help teach the courses, with students choosing primary and secondary disciplines from which to pursue their research project. Students work with faculty mentors on their research project in their junior year, to be followed by a thesis in their senior year, Dr. Pannapacker said.

While Dunker is not in the Mellon Scholars Program, the double major in English and philosophy says he can foresee the benefit of students taking part in the program in the future.

“We’re going to see a lot more use of multimedia – videos, podcasting, blogging and interactive Web sites – to present research to the academic world,” he said.

Dr. Cole says the students who have collaborated with him on the Sierra Leone project are gaining valuable experiences that will serve them well after graduation.

“Hope is committed to training students as global citizens,” he said. “If (students) are going to be global citizens, they must be exposed to different cultures. There must be an encounter with differences.”

Dr. Cole, who is also writing a book based on his Sierra Leone experiences last year and again this past summer, says he wants to provide educational materials and learning opportunities to give Hope students an opportunity to explore various issues in a global context.

“I think projects of this nature are crucial to this kind of discourse, of one’s humanity, of one’s perception of life, of one’s obligation as a Christian, of one’s relationship to his Maker,” Dr. Cole said.

Already, the work Dr. Cole and the Hope students have put in on this project is making an impact. At Hope Church, in Holland, Mich., church members raised \$7,000 in assistance for survivors after hearing a presentation by Dr. Cole and seeing the video. The presentation was coordinated by Dr. David Klooster, professor of English and department chairman. About \$1,500 has already been used to pay for tuition, books, supplies and uniforms for 20 children now living in the resettlement camps, Dr. Cole said. 🐦

