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Help Teachers Build a School or Contribute Medical Supplies

By Phillip Martin

The people of Tugbaken live their lives without so many things that Americans take for granted. The villagers didn't own much, but I found them some of the most generous and welcoming people I'd ever met.

The village shares an elementary school with the neighboring village, Parken, which is three minutes away. The school has no government support. There are no NGOs that assist the school. The buildings are constructed by adobe bricks and have zinc rooftops. Daniel Copeland, teacher and principal, said that it was the teachers who constructed the school. In all my travels around the world, I've never heard of teachers building their school.

They would like to expand with three more classrooms for a junior high facility. There is the possibility of teaching volunteers through UNICEF but they would need to construct three houses for these teachers and original classrooms eventually need to be replaced.

- Funds to create basic classrooms - cost starts at \$2,500.
- Large solar panels at the school are needed to light the very dark classrooms.
- Help with a clinic and basic medical supplies and soap are needed.

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The Mural Man Phillip Martin

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In all my travels around the world, I've never heard of teachers building their school except in Liberia - by Phillip Martin, The Mural Man

Going to the village of Tugbaken is a life-changing experience. It's something that Americans rarely, if ever, experience. It's difficult to fully comprehend.

Just getting to the village is an African adventure. The journey required a four-hour drive on the paved road into Liberia's interior to Ganta. That was the easy part. Then, I rode for seven hours in a land rover over a dirt and mud road to get to



Zwedru, the largest town in the southeast of the country. From there, it was a six hour shared taxi ride south to Fish Town, the capital of River Gee County. Finally, to get to the village of Tugbaken, I still needed an hour and a half ride on the back of a

motorcycle taxi on a path that took me off the main road and into bush that I'd never seen before.

Plan on a little more than three days of travel.

It's hard to imagine a place like Tugbaken. There were about twenty homes in the village. All were mud block with thatch roofs. If you walked there from the main road, it would take an hour and a half. And, the main road is where the closest town is that has any kind of shopping for any supplies. Once in Tugbaken, there is no electricity.

There is no running water. The community shares one well for clean drinking water. There are no shops. There is no clinic. There is no doctor. If you need any kind of medicine, go to Daniel Copeland's home. An NGO supplied him with a five-gallon bucket filled with an assortment of medications. Hopefully, maybe, you'll find what you need for a small price. Many Liberians in the interior of the country are subsistence rice farmers. They have what is called "hunger season". That's when the rice from the last harvest has run out and the next crop of rice is not yet ready to be harvested. It's a real season in Liberia.

And, it is only compounded by the poor roads that turn to mud in the rainy season, cutting off supplies for two or three months of the year.



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I spoke with Principal Daniel Copeland about the needs of the community. It could be a long list, but he mentioned three things.

1. **Help Build a Real School**

They would like to expand with three more classrooms for a junior high facility. There is the possibility of teaching volunteers through UNICEF but they would need to construct three houses for these teachers. And, original classrooms eventually need to be replaced.



2. **Help Light the School**

Surprisingly, one small piece of technology is used throughout the village. Very small solar panels generate light in homes at night. It was not requested, but I'd like to see large solar panels at the school to light the very dark classrooms.

3. **Help with Medical Supplies and the Clinic**

There are five or six villages in the Deabo Region. Tugbaken is the closest one to the main road. None of the villages have a clinic. Medication is limited. Help with a clinic is needed.



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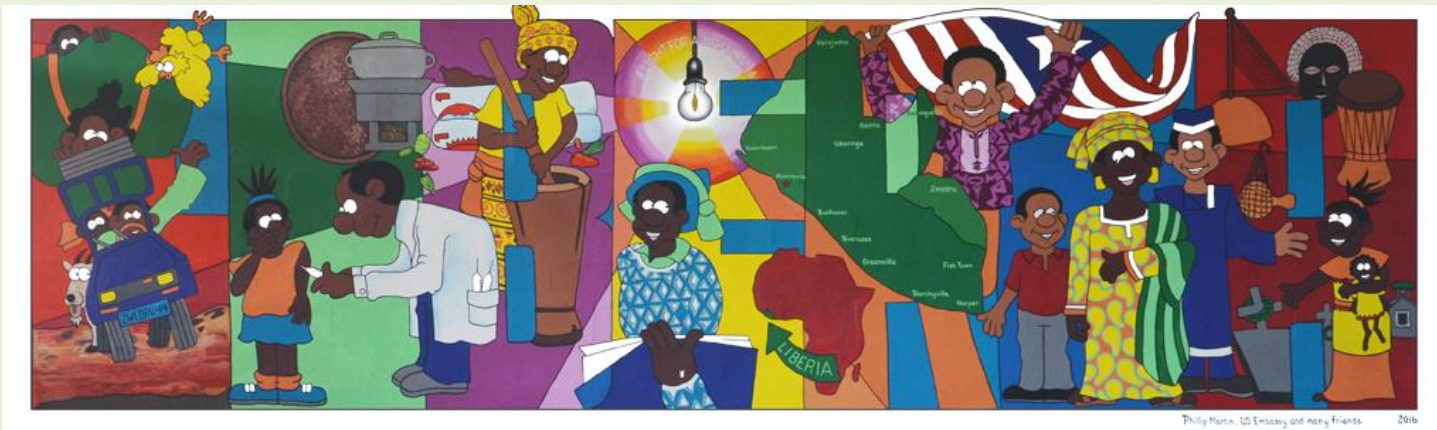
The people of Tugbaken live their lives without so many things that Americans take for granted. The villagers didn't own much, but they are some of the most generous and welcoming people I'd ever met. Across Africa, if you are truly welcomed, you are presented with a rooster. And, in Liberia, you're also greeted with kola nut and hot pepper.

I've seen these presentations. But, I never actually had a one in my honor. That is, until I visited Tugbaken. In less than twenty-four hours, I had five kola nut ceremonies, four chickens and an African gowning ceremony.



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Zwedru was almost unrecognizable. There were some basic buildings I remembered from 1989, but there was so much growth. I was unable to find my two previous homes. They used to be in the bush on the outskirts of town. There was no bush or outskirts where they were once located. But, I knew where to find the Multilateral High School. In spite of all the growth, it was easy. And, my friend Joshua had been the principal for ten years.

Zorzor was much smaller than Zwedru. My home town had several professional artists and four or five of them were among the twelve to help with the mural project. Upon discussion at our first meeting, we came up with a theme. Zwedru was more developed than Zorzor. There was much more electricity and availability to water.

Their issues of concern included are illustrated left to right on the mural:

1. **Safe Roads.** After my trip to Zwedru, I readily agreed with that one.
2. **Improved Health Care.** I've seen enough to know that nobody wants to get sick enough to need a hospital in the developing world.
3. **Food Security.** In Liberia there is a season called "hunger season". It's the time after harvested crops run out and before new crops are ready to gather. In Zwedru, the problem was accentuated when the roads became impassable during the rainy season. No new supplies could make it to town for two or three months.
4. **Education.** Okay, I put this in. It's still the teacher in me. And, I love maps, so I needed another one of Liberia and Grand Gedeh County.
5. **Traditions.** There is no country cloth made in Grand Gedeh. There are few – if any – locally made paintings, traditional masks, carvings or instruments. Artists in the community hope to change this.
6. **Importance of Family.** Nuclear or Extended, Present or Past, family is important in every situation we face in life including civil conflict, Ebola and hunger season.

The best idea of the session came from one of the youngest people present. Patrick, an incredible artist in his own right, tied everyone's ideas together. He suggested that there be a light in the center of the design. It should represent a light shining the way for a new Liberia. I wish it had been my idea, but that is the whole purpose of community discussion for the mural designs.



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A staff of six or seven really good painters took over once the sketch was completed. I don't always understand Liberian English, but I heard the artists marvel how fast I was at drawing and how steady my hand was. Yes, I'm always glad to understand those words. But, I had to take everything with a grain of salt. They were also amazed by my desktop mechanical pencil sharpener and the use of a chalk line to make a grid.

In about a half day of work, one third of the color was added to the mural. Since I had several artists among me, I had them add African patterns to clothing that normally would have been much more solid. And, when I needed an African drum, guitar and mask, I turned that over to my staff. I just showed an artist where I wanted them drawn. I'd never given up as much control of the murals as I did in Liberia. But, I knew it is the way it should be done when the opportunity presented itself. As it turned out, with so many local artists on hand, the mural in Zwedru was the easiest one I've ever worked on.

The artists enjoyed the secret that nobody ever discovered without help. During our brainstorming process, everyone liked the idea of a text that I used to spell "Zorzor" in the previous mural. There was some discussion that perhaps "Grand Gedeh" was better than using "Zwedru". I had my heart set all along on the name of the town. And, seriously, the name of the county was just too many letters. So, since these really were concerns across the whole country, it was decided that we really ought to use "Liberia". Look for a big red "L", a big green "I" and a big purple "B". If you can find them, you'll see the rest.

Now, you also know our little secret.

Wander My World With Me [Blog by Phillip Martin](#)



It could be easy to overlook Patrick. He was a shy, high school senior who really couldn't – or wouldn't - look me in the eye for several days when he spoke to me. But, in spite of that, Patrick captured my attention.

The first thing I noticed was his mind.

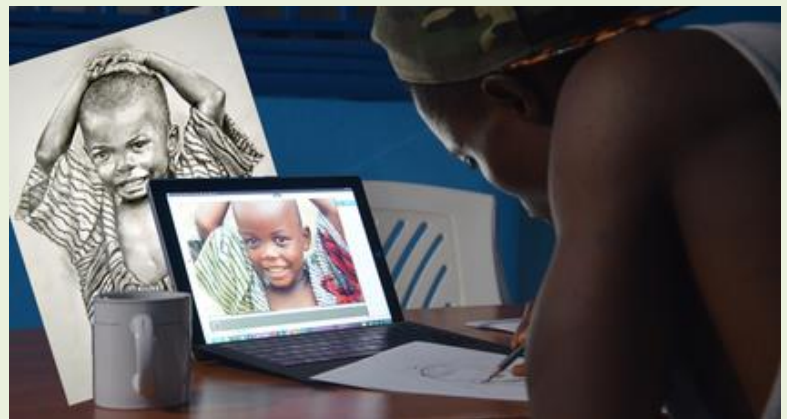
A group of nearly twenty adults, sitting around the American Corner Library in Zwedru, discussed possible themes for the mural. There was a good flow of suggestions, so I was both relieved and pleased. However, the youngest member of the group raised his hand and then neatly tied all of our ideas up in a ribbon. He said he saw a light that represented the way for a new Liberia. It would shine through problems in roads, health care, food supplies and education as well as preservation of traditions and the importance of family. The mural theme was set.

After the meeting, someone told me that I should see the art this kid did. I've seen high school art. Okay, I may be a little smug, but I've rarely ever seen a high school kid who can do even close to what I do. But, I'm always willing to look at someone's work. Patrick only had a few pieces photographed on his cell phone.

Yes, the next thing I noticed was his talent. I was completely blown away!

So much for smugness, vanity, pride or expectations. I truly believe this young man who lived a hundred-fifty miles off the paved road in a town surrounded by rainforest in Africa had more talent than I have and more than almost anyone I'd ever met. And, he did this with no training except YouTube videos, internet searches and a few old art books.

Truly amazing!



Immediately, I introduced him to the Public Affairs Officer from the US Embassy. The embassy hosts an art show twice a year, and Patrick's work must be seen – and sold! The kid painted, worked with pastels and watercolors, but his passion was drawing. So, I had a sit down session and watched him transform one of my favorite portrait photographs from Zwedru into art. He said it could be done in an hour and a half. I was horrified. It takes me closer to ten hours. Much to my relief, after a two-hour session, he was about half done. Maybe I disturbed him too much with conversation? However long it took, I had a treasure from someone who should become one of Liberia's leading artists.

What Can You Do to Help African Teachers Expand their Classrooms and/or Contribute to Medical Supplies?

[Email Phillip Martin,](#)
[The Mural Man](#)

1. Donate basic medical supplies for the Clinic
2. Start a fund-raising project at your school or club and adopt a classroom. The goal would be to help to contribute to building a classroom - basic funds needed for the basic changes are at least \$2,500 for each classroom
3. Contribute to the purchase of solar panels or supply solar panels



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