

## THE BIRTH OF CHANGE AGENT NETWORK UNIVERSITY (CAN-U)



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The birth of the Change Agent Network University (CAN-U) began during my first trip as an adult back to my hometown of Fissibu, Zorzor District, Lofa County, Northern Liberia on October 17, 2011.

From information that I gathered from my late Maternal Uncle, Mr. Flomo Pewu, I was born in Fissibu Town but when I was two years old, my parents relocated our family to John Hill, Bassa Community in Bong Mines, Lower Bong County, Central Liberia. Our family moved away from Lofa in search of greener pastures. Bong Mines, owned by Bong Mining Iron Ores Company was booming economically at that time.

My initial trip back to my hometown came with a lot of mixed emotions, including confusion, fear of the unknown and from having been disconnected from my own people since I was a two-year-old baby.

The terrible feeling of being a total stranger to my own people increased sharply day-by-day, leading up to the date of my trip home.

It was never my intention to go to my hometown at that time under such circumstances. But the decision to return home was largely enforced by my good friend and brother Martin Webb from London, England. Mr. Webb is a British white man, who is a documentary film maker, based in London, England. Martin and I met at the Oru - Ijebu Refugee Camp in Ogun State, Nigeria in 2004 while I was a refugee in that country.

Martin and I made the trip to Lofa on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011. We left Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, very early in the morning hours for Lofa. We arrived in Fissibu Town the next day, the 19<sup>th</sup> of October.

Lofa was very, very depressing, seeing extreme poverty on every corner of the towns. It was as if I had been punched in the gut, seeing extreme deprivation and indifference at a level like I have never seen nor experienced before. In my entire life, including the many-years in refugee camps in foreign countries, I had never witnessed impoverishment and complacency at the level I saw in Lofa.

The deplorable living conditions of the people especially the little children, women, and young people were heartbreaking. About 95% of the houses or huts in my town Fissibu were built out of dirt and clay, with palm thatch roofs and small doors and windows. The smaller houses were about 20 feet square or

rectangle in and the heights of these dwelling places were perhaps 5 to 6 feet high.

All I could see was hopelessness and a very bleak future for my people and the generations unborn. Fissibu Town was full of so many people full of grief, anger, bitterness, frustration, hunger, and despair.

There was a tremendous need to inject hope, opportunity, dignity, freedom, and create a desire for true independence.

The people couldn't even think of doing or becoming anything significant because the darkness here was too great for them to see any light at the end of a long and black tunnel. The years of lacking education, economic and social opportunities seemed too great to overcome.

As I walked around the town of Fissibu that day, I talked to a lot of people, particularly the children and young people. Hearing their stories, I realized how blessed and fortunate I had been over the last 7 years. I thank God for the opportunities and the second chances that so many people from all around the world had given to me so that I was now in the position to change my own story from poverty to prosperity, and from hopelessness to a brighter future. If that had happened to me, why could it not happen for the people of Lofa?

That shocking day was very torturing for me mentally; I couldn't understand or reason my way out of how I went from being born in Fissibu Town, with these harsh realities, to doing the things I do today! (Flying around the world, building schools, living a privileged life, with endless opportunities, such as being in a

leadership position, having great connections, with international friends and partners.) The list of my blessings and privileges are never ending.

To this very day, I still can't fathom how these things happened or how the transition and transformation took place; how my story changed is inexplicable. So, all I could say is- It's Just God!

### **THE QUESTION THAT BIRTHED THE CHANGE AGENT NETWORK UNIVERSITY (CAN-U)**

**“What are you going to do about home?”**

Martin kept doing his film documenting the work of my life by video recording all Fissibu Town, the people and the children. Every step I took, everything I said, and everyone I spoke with. He was everywhere and, in my face, so much that the whole filming thing became so intrusive to me that I almost told him to stop. I wanted that camera out of my face.

From the beginning I did not realize the significance of what Martin was doing and how difficult the work of filming and documenting my life must be!

It was around mid-day while Martin and I were walking in the hot sun that we got to the center of the town. He suddenly turned to me with his gigantic camera focusing on me intensely, he then asked me this question: “So, this is home Eric right?” I replied, “Yes this is my home.” then he said, “How do you feel being back home?” and I told him it felt good to be back home and thanks for bringing me to come back to Fissibu as an adult. I added that I felt

very sad and overwhelmed by the level of poverty and despair facing my people right now, especially the children and young people.

Martin then asked me another question, **“So, Eric, what are you going to do about your home and all of these things?”**

That was a very tough question to ask at that moment because I was still taking everything in, processing the entire situation and secretly asking God about what I must do in this kind of depressing and hopeless circumstance. I disparately wanted to bring hope and opportunity to my people who had been lost and forgotten about in a faraway-place.

After few moments, I said to Martin, without thinking I replied, “All we can do I guess is to build them a school like we have done in other places in the country for other people with whom I was not connected to at all.” I told him there was no possible way of solving these overwhelming, long-term problems without using the powerful tool of education for the children and young people. I knew it had to be a platform that will enable us to create a breeding ground for creativity, innovation, business, and entrepreneurship that would flourish, thereby bringing about independence, freedom, dignity, and self-reliance for an entire community.

Martin then said to me, **“So, when are you doing to do that?”** I replied, it could maybe be in the not-too-distant future if we return here again. And he said to me, **“Why not start now while you are here? Why wait for another time in the future?”** I said to him I thought we could do that by asking my family the elders and leadership of the town now for a piece of land. Perhaps 8 to 10

acres of land for a school to be built on. Then we-plan a fundraiser back in the US to develop a brand-new community of hope, love, peace, unity and prosperity for everyone in Fissibu Town and its surroundings.

### **GETTING THE FAMILY INVOLVED**

I arranged a meeting and discussed the matter with my younger brother David Sumo, my late Maternal Uncle Mr. Flomo Pewu and my late Paternal uncle Mr. Gayflorzee Yanguyea as well as my Auntie Yassah Ford. I asked them to lead and guard me through the process to acquire land, according to their time-honored traditions, the parcel of land for the school to be built. It was extremely important that all key people be included: the elders, the town leadership, including the youth leader, women's leader, the traditional council, the landlords, and the chiefs from in and around Fissibu Town.

What I quickly learned was that the land in my hometown is never to be *sold* to anyone, according to tradition and the laws of our ancestors. But if anyone, who is a bonafide son or daughter of Fissibu Town and who wants to build a private home, they could get a piece of land from the elders and landlords, free of charge.

My family as mentioned above, arranged a meeting between me and the stakeholders of Fissibu Town, so that I could present the idea to build a school and officially request the parcel of land I needed to undertake this life changing project and program, which would bring formal education to these underserved people.

## **MISINFORMATION, MISCONCEPTION, AND SPECULATIONS**

Meanwhile, in the city of Monrovia, there was speculation among my family members, co-workers, staff, and neighbors that I was never coming back home alive or very well physically. This began when I first visited Fissibu Town.

The reasons for this are understandable if you are familiar with the local customs, beliefs, and superstitions. Therefore, there is a strong superstitious belief among many Liberians that people who begin a development of this magnitude in Lofa County will not return home well or very possibly not alive. Lofa County is notoriously known to be a place of witchcraft and demonic powers, ritual killing, and anti-development attitudes are all a part of this thinking.

Prior to my trip to Lofa with Martin Webb, my mom was very apprehensive and extremely afraid for me to go to Fissibu Town because she had known that the town is notoriously known to be a demonic town. Many, if not most of the people there believe in African religion, consisting of Vudu and Juju, which is the worshiping and the belief in the power of the dead. They perform rituals, consult oracles, take part in witchcraft activities and animalism, dating back to prehistoric times.

It seems to me that my mom's memory of home, since they left Fissibu Town over 40 years ago, has been terrifying. She was very afraid to return home. She thought she was going to die, or some

of her children, or family members would die if they returned home for no specific reason.

Many of my family members plus other people from Lofa in general repeatedly told me that Fissibu Town was a terrible place, and they were fearful I might die if I returned there. They told me that the reason the town economy was so depressed, and the people so hopeless, was because of the practice of witchcraft by the people there.

My mom and other family members encouraged me not to return to Fissibu. They thought I might return at some point in the future when it might be safer for me there. They urged me to realize that because of the terrible stories of ritual killings and other demonic practices there, people who are from Fissibu leave and never return. And those who visit there usually don't sleep there, they just keep going. They might give a greeting and then go their way quickly because they feared for their own lives.

When I had first arrived in Fissibu Town, the few people that I knew in the town advised me not to eat food from strangers or outside of the home where I was staying. I was not to shake hands with anyone which is a common practice in Liberia. Plus, I should not answer anyone that called out to me at night. Also, I was advised not to take my shower outside like most people do and once I went to my room at night, I should not open my door until the next morning. That was very terrifying but unacceptable to me, that I would return to my birthplace, and I can't be able to do any of those normal things! To be there and not experience true, complete freedom and joy in my own hometown, was unthinkable. My point of contention was what was I doing there



then if I could not be a free man in my own birthplace? If I had to live in fear and suspicion of everyone around me, how would I be able to even attempt to make positive changes for my own people? So, I told the elders and town leaders at our next public meeting that I would be eating food from anyone who offered. Anyone whoever who called me in the middle of the night I would answer. Plus, when I go into my room at night, whoever knocked, needing my help, I would open. I told them I should feel safe and at liberty to live my life freely in my own town. I emphatically wanted them to know I have lived in so many different places outside of Liberia with people I didn't know, who spoke different languages, were from different cultures, had different skin colors who were more privileged and less privileged. But I had never felt discriminated against, set apart, or afraid for my life. Therefore, I intended to enjoy the peace and joy that I should expect to receive at home.

Therefore, I am going to enjoy the peace and joy that I should expect to receive at home.

I realized that the reason my family had been gone for this long was because of all these things. Unfortunately, our parents never introduced us to our hometown. So, we could connect with other family members in our place of birth. We never got to appreciate the culture, the heritage, the traditions, or the history of the place.

I was wondering, while receiving this scary information, about how were we going to be able to change this story. Plus, how could the story be changed if we didn't return home bringing education, a new story for them to build on, and exposure to new ideas and opportunities? How would we bring the light of a new

day and a new way that we had seen blossom in other places in the world?

So, I decided I had no choice but to return there so that I could help bring the changes that were necessary for them to have a better life, not only for the adults but for their children. If I died in the process, so be it. But I believe that what you don't know is always bigger than you. So, these obstacles had to be reduced if we were to have any chance at all!

Therefore, Martin and I took the trip to Fissibu Town, Lofa County. I thank God for the spirit of courage, the patience, the boldness, and the willingness to take these risks, even if it meant losing my life to go to a place where nobody wanted me. It is amazing what we can do if we refuse to give in to fear.

Today, looking back I am very glad that I made that trip because we indeed have been able to change the story of Fissibu Town, given hope to a dead place, and created a new breed of community people who are united. Now, they are living in peace and welcoming hope, opportunity and prosperity for all, the recipe for resounding success for everyone.

I was hesitant for Martin to go with me because of the negative information which I was being bombarded with at every turn which made me delay our trip for a very long time. However, I never shared this with Martin at all, and I'm sure he was wondering to himself what the holdup was all about.

-Finally, we spent a month in Fissibu Town working with the elders and town leadership to acquire the land. The decision of the location where the school would be built was made by the

youth of the town. They were very engaged, interested and committed to ensuring that this vision would be fulfilled. We ate together, shared jokes and laughed a lot. We shared personal stories, each about their own struggles and we also shared our hope for the future. The young people hung out with me all day, and all night, providing protection for me, and other things I needed. More importantly, they-were very helpful in helping me identify the key decision-makers in the town. With the suggestions, help and guidance of the young people, the location of the land was decided upon. They identified the property, told me the owner of that land, and led me to the leadership of the family that owned that property. Although the land belongs to everyone and is not to be sold, it is still divided among family members in the town.

#### **LOBBYING AND NEGOTIATING WITH THE ELDERS FOR THE LAND**

I spent a full month in Fissibu Town selling my vision to the people, particularly to the young people, while at the same time, lobbying and negotiating with the elders, the town leadership and stakeholders who were skeptical of my idea.

The vision to build CAN-U started in 2008 when I returned to Liberia for the very first time from America. I had a meeting with our local and national leadership teams at the Heart of Grace School in Jacob's Town, Rehab City View Community in Lower Johnsonville, Montserrado County.

The Heart of Grace School is the Headquarters of the ONLIB School System and is the mother of CAN-U. The purpose of the

meeting was for me to share my vision with our staff and working leaders to build schools, education villages, and develop communities in all fifteen counties of Liberia.

After the meeting, my younger half-brother, Mr. David K. Sumo, was about to return to Lofa County where he lives permanently with his family. Mr. Sumo agreed that it would be a great idea and a tremendous opportunity for our people if we began the process of building schools, like the Heart of Grace in our own hometown of Fissibu, or in the district's capital city of Zorzor.

My answer to my brother's request was: "You know, I left Lofa when I was just a baby and I have been gone for a very long time out of the country. So, I do not have any direct connection to the people there. I don't know the process of acquiring a land there to build a school and I don't know the system, or traditions, but I believe it is totally different. Nevertheless, I want you to go back to Lofa, start searching for a piece of land to buy for building a school and let me know the cost of the land. We also need to know how to process a title and everything else involved in buying land. Then I will send you funds to pay for the land and take care of all the other expenses."

Upon Mr. Sumo's return to Lofa, he started searching for a land all around to buy without success. He even contacted and appealed to the City Mayor Mr. Zubah K. Johnson of Zorzor City, to use his influence to make available a parcel of land. for sale for the school, still without success. Despite all the challenges and setbacks in acquiring land, Mr. Sumo and I kept in regular contact via phone calls from the U.S. and he kept me updated about developments in Lofa County, especially Fissibu Town.

When I returned to Liberia again from America in 2010, Martin Webb, videographer and I took our initial trip to Lofa. On this trip, I asked my brother David if he had any success in purchasing a land for the school? He said “No, I have asked all over in Zorzor City, I have not had any success. It has been very tough getting land to buy Eric.”

I then asked my brother to take Martin and me to Fissibu Town so that I could greet all our uncles, aunties, nephews, cousins, and other family relatives who were still living there. I wanted to reconnect with my own people and learn about my parents’ roots, heritage, and history as well as the history of the town and my own life story. I really wanted to learn about the rich culture, tradition, and language of the Lorma people. I had been gone so long that it would all be great information for me.

It was from this visit that I saw many children and youth that were all around the town having nothing meaningful to do towards education but to farm every day of every year. Most of them had no shirts on, were barefooted and not looking very healthy. The adults seemed to be just hanging around, having discussions here and there, playing ludo or checkers and drinking a lot of palm wine. Some of them had many children, from multiple wives and no stable source of income to meet the needs of the families.

## **STARTING THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY AND ILLITERACY**

When we returned to Zorzor to spend the night, I said to my brother, “I am really concerned about the horrible living conditions of our people, especially the children and youth, particularly when it comes to education in our town. This is not normal, plus it’s unacceptable and we must act now to initiate some changes! I believe it is our responsibility to our people; we don’t have a choice about this!

Then I told my brother that we must go back tomorrow to Fissibu and ask our relatives, the elders, and leaders of the town to give us a piece of property to build a school since we were unsuccessful in securing land in Zorzor.

He agreed with me, so the following morning, we went back to Fissibu Town and discussed the matter with our Uncle Gayflorzee Yanguyea.

Immediately, Mr. Yanguyea agreed with the idea and applauded us for the efforts of thinking about our village in such a positive manner. But he said to us, “We cannot sell land to any of our children or family members of the town. The land was given to us by God and our ancestors, and it is therefore not to be sold to anyone. But let’s go right now to your grandfather, Oldman Flomo Pewu, who is serving as the spokesman for the elders in the town. He will certainly be in the position to guide us through the process of organizing a meeting with all the stakeholders, elders, chiefs, youths, landlords, plus all the key men and women in the town. We will introduce you to and present your incredible,

life transforming ideas, highlighting the school and community development proposal to them. After that, we will make our request for the land to build the school.”

After meeting with our grandfather, he asked us to go home and come back to see him the next day.

The next morning, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010, we returned to Fissibu Town, as directed, and found the elders already assembled in the center of the town awaiting our arrival. Our Grandfather again introduced us to everyone and asked me to share our vision and what we needed them to do to make it successful.

I stood up in front of my elders and explained to them my mission and heart's desire was to build a school and community development center or education village to benefit our people and children but to do that, I needed 8-10 acres of land from them to fulfill this great vision, never even dreamed of by anyone present!

**ELDERS ATTENDING THIS FIRST MEETING WERE:**

1. Oldman Flomo Pewu, Spokesman for the elders - dead
2. Oldman Forkpa Yanquoi, Chief elder and also landlord of the town - alive
3. Madam Kebeh Monkulo, Women elder - dead
4. Gayflorzee Yanguyea, Elder -dead
5. John B. Howard, Landlord - dead
6. Sammie A. Johnson, Elder - dead
7. Beyan Gbedmai, Elder - dead
8. Madam Korpo Telegia Suwo, Elder
9. Flomo Gbongoin, Elder – alive

10. Mulbah Duonah Bodo, Clan Chief - dead
11. Mulbah Dunnah, Town Chief - alive
12. Amos Massaquoi, Youth Leader - alive
13. Yassah Kebeh, Chair Lady, alive
14. Oldpa Suwo Wolumai, Quarter Chief -alive
15. Kezelee Zamawu Wolumai, Youth Leader -alive
16. Kebeh Duyan Wolumai, Chair Lady - alive
17. Joseph P. Ford, Youth - alive
18. Alfred Suwo, Youth - dead
19. Alphanso Suwo, Youth -alive.

After my explanation of our ideas to the elders, they decided to go into a private meeting of their own. Upon their return, several elders asked questions and wanted further clarity about my plans.

Their key questions were very important:

- Where in the town was this school going to be built?
- Was this project going to help create job opportunities for the people of Fissibu Town other than just providing education-for the children?

At the end of the week, only few of the elders had agreed to give us the land. Others did not agree, which was not a surprise for me.

Some people questioned my age, saying that I was too young, naive, arrogant, and overambitious. Others said, “This has never happened here before that any of our people have returned home with this kind of impossible, crazy, or incredible ideas. Why should we trust this young boy?”

Some of the people said to me, “You know, we really like your ideas, but we have a lot of works to do on our farms and we need to leave now. We can’t afford to spend another day here in this



town talking about these impossible ideas. We have our families to feed, and we must go and earn money to get to provide for them. If we don't go to work now, it will create very big problems for us." So, I asked the people with all these questions and doubts: "Can we please just settle this matter today so that you can go to your farms, and I can go and take care of my own businesses too? I have spent almost a week here just talking."

One of the elders said accurately but angrily to me "Nobody has invited you here or asked you to build a school! We have spent several days discussing this issue, that's enough. We need to get back to work on our farms. If this is so important to you then you will wait for us regardless of the time it takes for us to get back to you. But you free t to go now to wherever you came from and come back to us when we done finished our farm works. Perhaps then we will have time to talk with you again. However, if this is important to you, you will wait!"

I realized that he was completely right and that I needed to change my thinking to become more patient. I couldn't undertake such a huge project or initial such a lasting program and be in a big-hurry. So, I then decided to stay as long as it took to accomplish my mission by getting that land to build the school.

## **DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE EYES OF THE LOCAL PEOPLE**

In one of our previous meetings with the elders, a traditional leaders stood up and said to me, "How can you come here thinking you know what we want for our town, without consulting with us first? We should be telling you, from a traditional perspective, what we want and need to do! We have our own ideas that we would like to undertake right now to benefit everyone. But we lack the finances, to implement them. So, I

suggest that you first consider and study our plan, then we can meet again soon to make a final decision about your request for land on which to build a school.”

The decision-makers in Fissibu Town are an ages-old, traditional, powerful council. This is the way it has always been, and I was clueless. The traditional council agreed with the idea of delaying my request for a piece of land until I first proved to them how I could underwrite the cost of this amazing project. Honestly, the whole process was becoming frustrating to me, with endless discussion, only to reach the end of the day without reaching any meaningful conclusions on the matter. The Chief elder told us to go home and come back the next morning.

However, that evening I decided to sleep in Fissibu Town so I could hopefully pay a personal visit to each elder individually in their homes. My hope was to explain the importance of the school.

Since I had seen how schools can change the culture of a village or town, I was very confident it would benefit the whole town and impact their lives positively for generations to come and leave behind a lasting legacy. I also wanted to make a personal connection with them and make a start at building a relationship with them. I needed everyone on board, so I could help them to see the bigger picture. I wanted more ordinary people to catch the vision that could lead to a community transformation, empowerment, job opportunity, and economic freedom!

Every leader I visited was very nice and welcoming, and surprised to see me! I don't think they ever expected that I would take my time to go to their homes to see them. It was very

important that I treat them with honor and respect, plus listen to their individual stories and challenges.

Everyone I met with that night, had similar concerns about getting their farm work done. They questioned how they could stay in the town several days to work with me and still complete their daily work on their farms. Further, they did not have money to hire workers and at the same time provide for the families.

After listening to their compelling stories, I completely understood their situations and felt compassion for them. So, I decided to provide each farm owner with some funds to pay workers to work on their farms, so they could provide for their families.

All the leaders were able to stay in the town for a couple of days to work with me in eventually getting the property. This was an eye-opening experience for me that taught me the importance and value of building relationships with people, teamwork, and paying close attention to their real needs, concerns, dreams, and value system.

## **BUDGETING COST OF THE LAND**

If I were to buy a similar piece of property somewhere else in Liberia, it would have probably cost me \$10,000 US Dollars. But because of understanding the tradition of our people, and their willingness to sacrifice, be patient, work with me, I spent less than \$2,500 USD, but none on land. My costs were on food, drinks, transportation, community support, surveying the land, and other processing fees and taxes.

## **THE DONATION OF 8 ACRES OF LAND**

On October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010, we met again all day, they agreed to give us 8 acres of land. Our agreement was to fund and support their traditional project.

The traditional women's council of the town asked us to build walls around their "forbidden area." This is a walled building, highly restricted and protected, but with no roof, which is in the center square of the town.

Funds for the women's project were provided by me to the Traditional Council who would do their own work, because non initiated people like me or my team members, could get involved with this project.

## **CONSTRUCTION OF THE FIRST SCHOOL BUILDING**

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, I sent the first payment of \$1,550 USD from America through Pastor Kollie Jallah to my brother, David in Lofa, to commence molding the cement blocks for the construction of the first school building. It was called "Building One." After molding of the blocks, on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012, David received another \$500 USD from me. This came through our younger sister Tetelma Wowoh, who lives in the city of Monrovia the capital of Liberia. These funds were used to build a warehouse at the site. As mentioned above, construction of the first school building on campus started on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012. The total amount of \$40,000 USD was spent on the construction of the first school building. We started the job with the following people:

<b>NAME:</b>	<b>PROFESSION</b>
1. Flomo Garwoloku -----	Mason
2. Moses P. Howard -----	Mason
3. Anthony Kollie -----	Mason
4. Beyan Garbo -----	Mason
5. Junior Fesseh -----	Mason
6. John K. Flomo -----	Mason
7. Yarkpazuo Flomo Meson -----	Helper
8. Sumo Thomson Meson -----	Helper
9. Kpadebah Flomo Meson -----	Helper
10. Joseph Leo Meson -----	Helper
11. Thomas Wolobah Meson -----	Helper
12. William Ford Meson -----	Helper
13. Korto Beyan -----	Cook
14. Garmai Konie -----	Cook
15. Mafata Keita -----	Water Supplier
16. Korpo Kokulo -----	Water Supplier
17. Varbah Beleyezza -----	Water Supplier

### **COMPLETION OF THE FIRST THREE BUILDINGS ON THE CAMPUS**

The construction job of building one (1) continued through May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. In the same year, we began construction of building 2. We started construction work on building three during the heat of the Ebola crisis in 2015. We were able to raise the building walls from the foundation to the roof.

Due to the economic hardships brought by Ebola upon the whole country, we stopped further construction work on the site until

2020. All three large buildings are presently being used to run the CAN Leadership Academy School and the Change Agent Network University. The grade school operates from 7:00AM through 3:00PM daily, serving nursery ages through grade 10. The university classes start at 3:00PM through 8-9:00PM Mondays through Fridays.

### **MR. GEORGE THOMAS RELOCATED TO LOFA COUNTY**

In 2014, Mr. George A. Thomas, a founding member of Change Agent Network and Assistant Country Director at the time, was relocated to Fissibu Town. He came from the headquarters school, called Heart of Grace School in Lower Johnsonville, Montserrado County, to join the local team. His task was to jumpstart the academic work with the setting up of the 842 Computer Training School in Fissibu Town. We renamed the land that was given to us for the school calling it “New Breed Community”. We chose this name because we believe it is a center for the rebirth of the minds and hearts of our people, introducing them to a completely new way of thinking, with a new perspective on life, of serving, loving, sharing, relationship building, teamwork, collective impact for social, economic and academic change. Self-reliance and helping others were about to show up in Fissibu Town! It would be a community transformation center, where everyone is important and is given the necessary tools to use to break the cycle of poverty out. Of their own lives. Knowledge, information, and a second chance would birth hope and opportunities to become active participants in finding solutions to their own problems. Eventually, they, in turn, would help others in society to do likewise for themselves, thereby moving Lofa County and Liberia forward together.

After the roofing of both buildings two and three, Mr. Thomas started to encourage the workers by establishing a fellowship meeting in building one where members of the community and those who work on the campus could come and hear of the Good News of Jesus Christ. They would meet during the week and on Sundays so that individuals could have the opportunity to enrich lives by building a personal relationship with Christ. The name of the fellowship was Christ New Breed, which was a part of and named after the Christ New Breed Fellowship at the Heart of Grace School in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia.

In March of 2015, Mr. Thomas invited Mr. Solomon S. P. Fillie and Mr. T. Udly Guah from the headquarters school to come over to Lofa and take over the running of the computer school plus fellowship that he helped to establish.

#### **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE 842 COMPUTER TRAINING SCHOOL IN LOFA COUNTY**

In addition to the establishment of the new fellowship, the team in Lofa also decided to open a computer school. They suggested the idea to me. I enthusiastically welcomed and supported their plan by providing the computers and other equipment necessary to open the computer school, which we named the “842 Computer Training School.” The computer school started on June 25, 2015, with a total enrollment of one hundred and fifty students. These students came from Fissibu Town, Zorzor City, and the surrounding towns and villages. This was the first computer

training center ever established in the long history of Zorzor District, Lofa County.

One hundred and twenty students graduated in basic computing from that school. The school continued operating until 2017 when it was shut down because some of the teachers left to further their studies in Monrovia. The hope was that one day they would return to the community to continue teaching.

### **BRINGING LIFE BACK TO THE NEW BREED COMMUNITY**

Upon graduation from institutions of higher learning, some of the staff who had sought advanced education, came back to Fissibu Town, and decided to volunteer. In September of 2020, the New Breed Community was reopened to provide opportunities in education, restoring social and economic enrichment once again.

One of those who returned was my brother David who was also the County Representative of Change Agent Network - Liberia (CAN) and Opportunity Network Liberia (ONLIB) Mr. Sumo studied Public Administration and Economics at the University of Liberia.

The other gentleman who returned was Mr. Oliver S. Paye, a former teacher from the headquarters school, (Heart of Grace School in Monrovia). According to Liberian tradition, Mr. Paye is from Nimba Counties because his dad is from there, but his mom is from Lofa. Mr. Paye studied Education and Accounting at the University of Liberia. He currently as in today, February 28, 2022 resides on the CAN-U Campus in the New Breed



Community in Fissibu Town, while his family resides in Monrovia.

In 2020, these two fine gentlemen returned to Lofa to join Mr. J. Kolubah Gbargorzizi, Pastor in charge of the New Breed Fellow in Fissibu Town. Their goal was to begin an Agriculture Project on the school campus.

They mobilized the members of the community to join forces with them. This effort ultimately led to the opening of the grade school and subsequently CAN-U.

The agriculture project started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 2020. About 120 people benefited from the project by providing them employment opportunities. My team in Lofa hired some men from the town to remove brush and clear the farmland. Women were hired to prepare the ground and make up the seedlings or nursery beds for planting.

From this agriculture project, we were able to enroll 50 students in the CAN Leadership Academy School, which is the grade school for the academic year 2020/2021. This was done through a special program called “Work for school fees.” I set up this program to empower students and parents, who didn’t have the actual cash to pay school fees. Before school began, they were given a portion of farm work to do, which was substituted-for school fees.

## **OPENING CAN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY SCHOOL**

Before the school opened, I went back to Fissibu Town on November 19, 2020. I had last been there a little over three years prior.

CAN/ONLIB, provided financial resources to complete construction work on the campus, repair-and supplied materials for both the grade school and CAN-U. The repairs and other work on the structures created a beautiful, inviting, and academically equipped, learning environment, for the very first time in the history of the county! The work to get the school ready for opening started officially on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2020, with over 50 people working each day until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020. Good people, working hard, with the good Lord can do wonderful things!

The opening of the CAN Leadership Academy School (Nursery-8th grade) was on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. This school is currently operating with 117 students, nine 9 administrative staff, 10 instructional staff, and six support staff members.

The school has a well-equipped functional library, computer lab, modern restrooms, and comfortable classroom seating.

Presently, the campus has three buildings with each building having four classrooms, a total of 12 rooms. Building two has been petitioned into eight classrooms and is currently being used for our elementary section.

I am so grateful to the young people of Fissibu Town for helping to make this long-awaited dream a reality. They welcomed the vision, embraced it and made sure the mission was fulfilled. Eventually, because of these young people's commitment, and the cooperation of the elders and the entire town, the CAN Leadership Academy School, and the Change Agent Network-University (CAN-U) were birthed!

Prior to the land becoming available, I learned a lot from these people concerning their disappointment in others who came before me including churches, civil society organizations, nonprofits or non-governmental organizations and individuals who made so many empty promises.

Most of these people made attractive but empty promises, then left the town and never returned. It was all talk but no concrete action. Therefore, all the people's, number one question was, "Why should we trust you? How sure are we that you will do what you promised, and when will you do it?"

Because of their previous disappointments, they suggested that I start this new development of the town immediately while they are still alive!

This question was extremely important to the elders who all were far advanced in age. They committed to give the land, now it was very important that I do everything possible, so they could see the start of this great transforming vision begin to take shape before they die. They would go into their graves rejoicing if we helped them see the beginning of the foundation of this grate program of community transformation and collective impact for social

change. They would know their grandchildren and unborn generations to come would certainly enjoy the fruits of their labor. This put a lot of pressure on me financially, physically, and spiritually as well, to jumpstart this program without delay, so that I would not become one of those liars, who made promises they couldn't or wouldn't keep.

The ultimate establishment of the CAN Leadership Academy School (CLAS) and the Change Agent Network University (CAN-U) is a promise made and a promise kept to my own people. "Oh, it's just God"

## ERIC WOWOH RETURNED TO HIS HOMETOWN (FISSIBU, LOFA COUNTY)

Written by Martin Webb, a freelance documentary film maker from London, England

Having made the decision to make a documentary film about the life and work of Eric Wowoh, it felt important for the film to understand where Eric was born and to see him return to this environment for the first time since he'd left as a child.

I knew that Eric was born in Lofa, was proud to call himself a Lofaian and an indigenous man of Liberia, but I didn't understand what this really meant, and I wasn't sure that he did either. This also formed part of my motivation for asking Eric to take me back to see his humble beginnings. I wanted to understand it, but I

wanted to understand it through him, and I wanted to see what emotions and motivations it would stir in him.

Additionally, one of the main objectives of Change Agent Network (CAN) is to decentralize development in Liberia and to move educational projects to the parts of the country that have never seen them before. The county of Lofa looked like a distant and rural place on the map of Liberia, but also exactly the sort of place that could benefit from the work of CAN. Eric and I always talked about expanding the vision to meet the needs of the entire country, so why not Lofa – it was miles away but that was sort of the point.

Eric did not want to go.

I spent nearly 3 months with Eric in the summer of 2010 in Liberia and pushed him on the Lofa plan. When can we head out there? When was the last time you'd been there? Let's make plans soon, please. I think I annoyed Eric with my constant requests. He was very reluctant and didn't seem interested in my proposal. It had to be up to him – I could only ask so much. I didn't realize why he was so against it at the time. But why should I, here is a man with a lot on his plate, someone who has all of the stresses of national development on his shoulders already. Looking back on his reticence now, if I had to guess, I'd say that he just was not ready to go back. In every sense of what that would mean for him, I don't think he felt prepared emotionally, intellectually, or financially – I think the thought of what he might see and the added burden that this would create on his already overstretched sense of duty would have been too much.

But one year later...Eric agreed that we should go to Lofa together.

We first travelled to Lofa together on 17th October 2011. The journey was not easy. Our chartered taxi broke down in Kakata and held us back. We got another one ok, but it was a frustrating start. I carry two bags, and filming equipment and the roads to Lofa are bad so it was a bumpy ride.

Zorzor was our Lofa destination, and we reached a nearby guesthouse at nightfall. Our arrival was strange – I remember a lady chasing after her infant son with some sticks. He was petrified and rightly so - when she caught up with him, he got a beating. I don't know what for, but I remember-thinking that in England we'd call this child abuse. But we were not in England, we were in Lofa and the rules here were clearly different.

The next day we were greeted by David. He is a relative of Eric and it quickly became apparent that he'd be our guide for our short stay in Lofa. We all got in a car and made the short journey to our final destination of Fissibu. This was the village that Eric was born in.

When we arrived, we were greeted by lots of people – some of them were relatives of Eric and I think it must have been quite overwhelming for him. After so many years of separation from his family because of war, this was a small moment to help put things right. He absorbed it all very well and seemed happy to reconnect and learn from the new family he had in front of him.

It occurred to me that these people were complete strangers in many ways, but there was a warmth and openness from them that helped the moment. It must have been difficult for them as well, all of a sudden, this white guy turns up with a camera following a Lofaian who says he was born in the village – it's not an everyday occurrence, I'm sure.

We spent the day touring the village with family members and locals talking and listening. It became clear that the village itself was stuck in the same cycle of poverty that had gripped so much of the country, but it felt a little more isolated here. I remember thinking that if something bad happened, how would we get out...? There didn't seem to be any real community services that we could see or much of a direction or plan to make things better for everyone. We both noticed this, it was obvious to us, but then we'd seen other parts of the world and seen what life could be like; these people were in the dark in many ways.

At the end of the day, I interviewed Eric. I wanted to know what he made of it all. The thing that he'd been afraid of all along was very real and written on his face. These people needed help and they needed his help, but he fell short of saying this on camera, almost afraid to confront the obviousness of the situation. He talked about what he'd seen, and what he thought was missing, etc.

...my question to him was: What are you going to do about what you have seen here...?

A decade later we have the answer Change Agent Network University (CAN-U)

## BRIEF HISTORY OF LOFA COUNTY

### LIBERIA

According to the Liberian Constitution, Liberia is a Unitary State in which power is shared between central and local government, but the Central Government has much of the power for effective and smooth administration of the country.

### THE 15 COUNTIES OF LIBERIA

In view of this constitutional mandate, Liberia is subdivided into fifteen (15) counties headed by superintendents, and the counties are further subdivided into districts, chiefdoms, clans, cities and towns, and Lofa County is one of those fifteen (15) counties.

The Legislature of Liberia was modeled based on the Legislature of United States.

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LOFA COUNTY

Lofa began as a county in 1964. The symbol of Lofa is a flag comprised of three colors: green, light blue and brown. In the middle of the flag, there is a hand holding a stick which symbolizes unity.

**The map of Liberia and Lofa County highlighted in red**



**The Flag of Lofa County**





## LOCATION

Lofa County lies in the northwestern corner of the country. It is bounded on the north by the Republic of Guinea, on the west by Sierra Leone and the south by Gbarpolu and Bong Counties. Lofa is the third largest county in Liberia.

## POLITICAL DISTRICTS

Lofa County has seven (7) Political Districts with one (1) Township. The Capital City of Lofa County is called Voinjama.



## TRIBES

Lofa has seven (7) Liberian tribes: Lorma, Kissi, Gbandi, Kpelle, Mande, Belleh, and Mandingo.

## RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL PRACTICES

African Religion/Tradition remains number one practice in the county. Christianity is number two and Islam number three. Tradition culture remains strong in Lofa. The Poro and Sande societies play critical roles in the education and institution of boys and girls. This practice is called Bush/Native Education which is taught orally. There are no textbooks, research materials nor curriculums to implement Bush/Native Education.

## POPULATION

As of the 2008 Census, Lofa County had a population of 276,863, making it the third most populous county in Liberia. Population: Foya District (100,000), Kolahun District (59,057), Salayea District (22,968), Vahun District (16,876), Voinjama District (40,730), and Zorzor District (40,352)

## CLIMATE

The climate in Lofa is tropical, hot, and humid. The temperature normally ranges annually from 24 degrees to 30 degrees Celsius (75 degrees to 85 degrees Fahrenheit).

## TRAVEL DISTANCE FROM MONROVIA TO LOFA COUNTY

Distance from Lofa to Monrovia is 240 kilometers (149 miles) by road.

### RAINFALL, MOUNTAINS AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Lofa has an average rainfall of around 115 inches. The important mountains are the Wologisie, Wutizi and Wanigisi.

The soil of the County is clay loam, sandy clay loam and loam. Agriculture products are rice, cocoa, and coffee. Mining products are gold and diamonds. The vegetation is composed of tropical rainforest and low bush.

County	Total	Male	Female	Area	Acres	Hectares	Density
Lofa	276,863	133,611	143,252	3,809.68	2,438,206.58	986,707.20	73

Source: 2008 National Population and Housing Census

## HEALTH CENTERS

There are 57 Health Centers including 4 referrer Hospitals namely: Tellewoyan Hospital in Voinjama, Voinjama District; Current Lutheran Hospital in Zorzor, Zorzor District; Kolahun Hospital in Kolahun, Kolahun District; and Borma Hospital in Foya, Foya District.

Source of Information: LIBERIAN INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS AND GEO – INFORMATION SERVICES (LISGIS)

(<https://www.lisgis.net/county.php?&7d5f44532cbfc489b8db9e12e44eb820=MjU%3D>)

## NUMBER OF TOWNS

Lofa has over two hundred towns with vast majority of the people who are living in these towns believing in and practicing Bush/Native Education and African Religion.

Zorzor District has 42 towns and they all believe and practice African Religion and Bush/Native Education. Zorzor is the district in which we have built the Change Agent Network University (CAN-U)

## THE STATE OF CHRISTIANITY IN LOFA COUNTY

According to local report, 23 towns out of the above-mentioned 42 towns have embraced Christianity and yet have very few churches available for the people to attend. The remaining 19 towns have not begun practicing Christianity yet. There is no church in any of these towns.

We strongly believe that, as followers of Christ, this is one of the greatest opportunities ever given to us. We have a wheat field ripe for the harvest, but where are the workers? This is a tremendous chance to reach all of these people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the very first time in history!

## NUMBER OF SCHOOLS PER DISTRICT

Lofa County has seven Educational Districts, which are Foya, Kolahum 1&2, Voinjama, Zorzor and Salayea. These seven Educational districts have approximately 364 schools both Public and Private, Elementary to Senior High (Nursery-Grade 12). From 2005-2020, about 40 High Schools in Lofa have graduated approximately 5,000 students every School/Academic year.

Note: Quardu Gbondi and Voinjama Districts has one Education District.

## COLLEGES IN LOFA COUNTY

Unfortunately, there are only three (3) Colleges in Lofa County offering an Associate Degree. These colleges were established between 2012 and 2014.

The three colleges currently operating in Lofa County are: (1) Lofa County Community College ~~owns~~ owned by the Government of Liberia. It is ~~situated~~ in the county's capital, Voinjama (2) Free Pentecostal College owns by the Free Pentecostal Church of Liberia, which is ~~situated~~ also in Voinjama (3) Esther Bacon School of Nursing and Midwifery Institute,

which is ~~situated~~ in Zorzor Town, Zorzor District. This college only offers an Associate Degree in Nursing and Midwifery.

The above-mentioned statistics and educational facilities in the county, show a clear indication that Lofa County, specifically Zorzor and Salayea Districts have been deprived ~~and denied~~ of higher education opportunities since the entire country (Liberia) was founded in 1847.

## THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE LACK OF HIGHER EDUCATION

We strongly believe that Zorzor and Salayea Districts are greatly affected by the aforementioned harsh realities. The lack of educational opportunities for the forgotten and lost people, ~~youths, and children~~ in this part of the world is perhaps because of their location and low economic status.

In fact, less than 80% of high school graduates from these two districts normally return to their villages and farms to practice primitive farming to take care of their families. Promising, and in some cases, possibly brilliant, and talented young people are constantly frustrated, and disappointed because of the lack of opportunity to acquire higher education leading to a brighter future.

Meanwhile, Zorzor and Salayea Districts are located in the middle of the two major educational centers/cities which are Voinjama and Gbarnga in Bong County. At the time, we traveled to Lofa, it was about a 3 hours' drive on a very rough, narrow and sometimes dark road. Transportation cost to travel from Zorzor to Voinjama and back, is about is \$3,000.00 Liberian Dollars or \$30.00 United

States Dollars. It takes about the same drive and cost to travel from Zorzor to Gbarnga, Bong County and back.

Therefore, with all the travel costs, the long distances, plus housing, food and other expenses, it is difficult, if not impossible for an economically challenged student from Lofa County to earn a four year Bachelor's Degree in either Voinjama or Gbarnga. It's a very long sentence, but I can live with it.

The cost involved may be much more than just the money for school fees. Even if they manage to start school, the possibility of completing their programs may be slim because 90% of these high school graduates are unemployed and self-supported. The major sources of income for most of the graduates are from small businesses, farming and hunting. The distances involved also present social and domestic pressures on students by being absent from their young families to go to school in faraway locations for four years. This is especially difficult since they don't have much money to support their families.

## NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN ZORZOR AND SALAYEA DISTRICTS

Zorzor Education District has 63 schools both Public and Private. Salayea District has 22, which is a total of 85 Public and Private Schools in the two districts. Out of the 85 schools, there are seven (7) high schools in Zorzor District, and two high schools in Salayea District for a total of 9 schools. The two districts' statistical report indicates that the nine high schools in the two districts have graduated over 3,750 students in the last fifteen years (2005 to 2020).

## HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION PERMITS CHANGE AGENT NETWORK UNIVERSITY TO BEGIN OPERATION IN LOFA COUNTY.

### “Breaking The Cycle of Poverty Through Higher Education in Liberia”

The Board of Commissioners of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) has given its approbation to the management of the ‘proposed Change Agent Network University (CAN-U)’ to begin full operation this March 2022. The approval was granted on January 17, 2022.

NCHE Board said its approval to the ‘proposed CAN-U’ authorizes it a “Licensure” status to commence operations in the specific disciplines, including Business, Theology, Education and Agriculture.

“The approval of the proposed CAN-U by the Board of Commissioners of NCHE authorizes the College a ‘Licensure’ status to commence operations of the College in the specific disciplines mentioned above at the Associate level for an initial two-year period,” NCHE said in its letter to CAN-U’s management.

The Commission further said that during these initial two years of operations by CAN-U, it will routinely monitor and evaluate the performances and deliveries of its programs approved. “Next, CAN-U will reapply for the status of accreditation, and the approved program and activities will be thoroughly reassessed, to determine the CAN-U’s fitness for full accreditation status,” NCHE said in its letter signed by its

Director General, Professor Dr. (PhD) Edward Lama Wonkeryor.

Change Agent Network University President Dr. Isaac Podah (right) along with one of his staff, Mr. John Lake, display the letter of permission given to them by the National Commission on Higher Education

Notwithstanding NCHE granting permission for CAN-U to begin operations, it recommends, however, that CAN-U's applying name be changed to "Change Agent Network College" in keeping with its programs approved at the Associate degree status, aligned with NCHE Policy for Regulating Postsecondary Institutions within Liberia.

Speaking with this media outlet, Dr. Isaac Podah, President, CAN-U, assured the Commission on Higher Education that its recommendations will be fully implemented. Dr. Podah thanked NCHE for granting them the licensure to operate a postsecondary learning institution in Liberia.

The CAN-U president further said that they are hoping to begin with at least 100 students when they begin full academic operations in March on their campus, which is based in the New Breed Community, Fissibu Town, Zorzor District, Lofa County, Northern Liberia.

Dr. Podah: "We hope to have more than 100 students by the time we begin academic activities. We are going to try as much as possible for people to turn out to take the entrance. We want students from all around the country."



On what they are going to do to attract students, he added: “We have observed that people are suffering, and times are hard. While we will want students to pay their fees in cash, we have also devised a way for students who may not have 50 percent in cash. They will be required to bring the balance in goods, including Palm Oil, farm produce, etc.”

According to him, it’s not CAN-U’s intention to make money, but to break the chain of poverty through providing quality education for its students. He also stated that they are going to begin with the colleges that NCHE approved and will be hoping to expand and include other programs in the future.

He boasted that CAN-U is “fully prepared financially and academically for opening in March 2022.”

He then thanked their host, Fissibu townspeople, for giving them the land to build their community and university.

According to Mr. Eric Wowoh, Founder of CAN, and the Change Agent Network University (CAN-U)

“This is the first indigenous higher institution of learning ever in the entire history of Lofa County. The land to construct CAN-U was donated by the local people themselves. It was built, it is owned, and operated by citizens of Lofa County. This is purely a pride of Lofa County! However, we alone cannot afford to continue to undertake this massive developmental task all by ourselves. I therefore, call upon all sons and daughters of Lofa County in particular and Liberia at large, friends, lovers of Lofa and partners to join us in paving and leading the way for this positive transformation to become

resounding success for all. I want us to collectively work together to move Lofa County and Liberia forward. Many, many thanks to all our team members, supporters, and partners both local and international for their financial, material, and moral support given to make this long-awaited vision to be fulfilled in our lifetime. We are super excited and grateful to God for everything!”