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The Student Becomes the Teacher

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The student becomes the teacher

A professor emeritus draws on a trusted former student for guidance as they work together to change the world.

It's 4 a.m. and still dark in Port Loko, Sierra Leone, as Mr. Jo-elle draws the day's water from the compound well. "Ow di bodi?" ("How are you?") he calls softly to a young boy building a fire nearby.

"Nobody really turns on the flashlight at night because if you did you'd see spiders the size of your hand," Marrant explains.

For Joel Marrant, known to his students as "Mr. Jo-elle," days begin in the middle of the night before the harsh African heat moves in. Soon, the school compound will stir with 900 high school students, half of whom live on site. Teachers, some volunteers like Marrant, will review lesson plans over morning tea and begin the rituals of the day – all to educate youth in the war-ravaged country.

Facilities are minimal, with only two hours of electricity and one meal served daily, usually white rice and sauce. Marrant shares a room with large insects and whiskered critters.

"My hope was that she would go into some field to make the world a better place, and she did," he said. "We both had a lot to learn from each other."

Marrant describes Betancourt as "brilliant" and one of his top students. "I never felt that we had a very hierarchical relationship," she said. "His perspectives have been very influential in my own work on children and families facing adversity due to violence and the vestiges of HIV/AIDS."

Betancourt, director of the Research Program on Children and Global Adversity at the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University, works with former child soldiers, AIDS orphans and refugees documenting factors contributing to risk and resilience in the lives of vulnerable children. She’s studying how some children and families channel their resourcefulness in a positive direction. She is also an affiliate of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and an associate scientist in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Children’s Hospital in Boston. She was named the Linfield College alumna of the year in 2013.

Kindred spirits from the start, Marrant and Betancourt have remained in touch since Betancourt served as Marrant’s student research assistant at Linfield.

"He and I have always shared a passion and respect for diverse cultures and social justice," she said. "His perspectives have been very influential in my own work on children and families facing adversity due to violence and the vestiges of HIV/AIDS."

Like the best teacher-student relationships, theirs is built on shared principles and trust. As a student, Betancourt said Marrant respected her values and opinions with "tremendous humility," and she echoes techniques learned from Marrant in her own teaching at Harvard.

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Marrant is no stranger to living in other cultures. Before retiring in 2007, his research included an ethnographic study of a Romanian village, where he lived for extended periods. Still, this experience in Sierra Leone included a number of “firsts” for Marrant – his first time to Africa, his first time working with an NGO, his first time teaching high school students.

In 2013, Sierra Leone was named the most corrupt nation in the world, but students want to change this. Marrant helped them found Future Leaders of Sierra Leone Against Corruption. The program is an ethical lifetime commitment to counter corruption in the country. So far, more than 2,000 youth have heard the message.

"The Ebola outbreak has thrown everything into chaos,
but it makes it that much more important that I return,” said Marrant, who plans to go back to the country once health restrictions are lifted. “The teaching is important but what is needed above all is hope. There’s a real need among students to change the culture of Sierra Leone, and that so caught my soul.”

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of the project for Marrant has been the focus away from professional life. This is not about building a resume or adding to his vita.

“It’s not about me,” he said with a smile. “This is a good thing to do, and the satisfaction is more important than stroking my ego. Going to Sierra Leone has changed my world and changed me for the good.”

– Laura Davis