

Hope for the hopeless

Paul Lashmar writes of how an act of kindness is reaping dividends for disabled people

ON A COLD, blustery winter's day in England its difficult not to like Abdulai (Abs) Dumbuya, a charismatic person who will put others before him and for whom nothing is too much.

We meet in the offices of Easthamstead Baptist Church before heading off to talk over lunch. Abs is preparing to return to his home country of Sierra Leone, after nearly 20 years in the UK, to head up a project changing lives in the way he was helped when he first came to England.

Named after a lady who supported his studies but whom he never met, The Dorothy Springer Trust (DST) was founded with the vision of enabling disabled people in Sierra Leone to support themselves through skilled employment so allowing them to participate as equal members of society.

Crippled by polio at the age of five, Abs grew up in a Leonard Cheshire Home in Freetown, the Sierra Leone capital. It was here that he showed an interest in

engineering and after many false starts studied A-levels in Kettering. Later he took an engineering degree and then a PhD at Loughborough University.

'At the time I believed my studies were being funded by the Leonard Cheshire organisation,' he says.

However, it was only after Mrs Springer's death in 2003 that he learnt of his anonymous benefactor and how she funded his studies. He was deeply touched by this generosity but was aware of how this had changed his life. Abs first returned home in 2005.

'I discovered that some of the people I had grown up with were now living on the streets,' he says. 'I realised that it could so easily have been me and decided that I must do something to make lives better in the way that I'd been helped.'

In 2007 Abs launched DST with the help of Mrs Springer's daughter Margaret Atkins and friends who wanted to support him.

Initially the Trust collected computers to be used in places such as Leonard Cheshire homes but in 2008 they identified that just supplying equipment wasn't fulfilling the vision they had laid out. It was decided that they



needed to focus on the training of people in specialist IT skills. With a new direction Abs returned to Freetown to look for the first set of candidates to receive training scholarships

Abs works knowing he is not alone and that others are behind him. Senior minister at Easthamstead Baptist Church Chris Porter says that the church had been looking and praying for some time for an organisation to support overseas on a personal level. Abs' arrival in their congregation was the answer to their prayer. 'We could fulfil one of the churches long-term visions for caring for others around the world by supporting Abs and the Trust,' explains Chris.

Chris and church elder Rob Lee, who is also a trustee of DST, visited Sierra Leone in 2010 to see how they could help. 'It soon became apparent that while the country was poor and in need we could make a real difference by giving people practical skills and support.'

Church giving is planned into the budget each year so that enough money is donated to support two candidates and during Abs' last visit to his home country the Sunday school wrote him letters which he says were uplifting and kept him going. Chris Porter describes supporting the Trust as a unifying experience across the whole church.

For Rob Lee, chairman and treasurer of DST, the value of the direct support given by the church allows them to plan ahead knowing that certain amounts of money will

be available. But its not just the financial support – it's feeling that the Trust is not alone is its work. 'Praying for the work of the trust is deeply valued and through the churches personal connection to Abs the church members feel more emotionally attached to the trust.'

Abs' influence stretches to the Sierra Leone Government with the First Lady, Sia Korma, supporting the Trust and attending its launch event last year.

Chris and Rob will lead a team of 10 out to Freetown this summer to carry out project work, meet those being supported by DST, and link up with a Baptist church that they have been working with.

Abs will not only drive forward the vision of the trust to see disabled people in skilled employment but will actively monitor the training of the candidates, helping them to get jobs and act as advocate for disability rights issues. Already in previous visits he has chaired disability rights conferences and assembled a team of UN and Government investigators to look into reports of a disabled woman being beaten for failing to attend her village chief. The investigation saw charges brought and the Chief forced to offer an apology.

While a bill is in progress, Sierra Leone is one of the last African countries not to have disability rights legislation in place. Abs is determined to change that. 'I'm going to lobby for the bill to be put into law.'

And he will.



From left: Rob Lee, Abs, and Chris Porter meet Minister of Education, Dr Minkalu Bah, June 2010

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