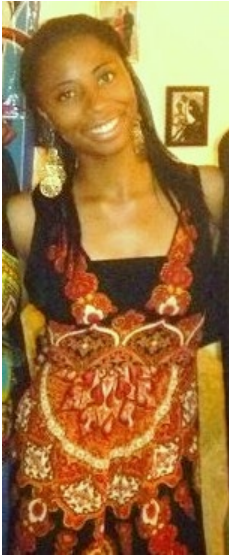


# Asalou



“It was my first time traveling outside of the U.S. Going to a developing country..., I was nervous.”

Twenty-two year old Asalou Givens recalls her feelings about her first visit to the country her parents call home. She remembers being very anxious about the trip; unsure about what she would see and eat and where she would stay. Givens, at the time, was a high school junior. She had heard many stories about Liberia. The ones that resonated with her the most were those of a bloody civil war and unrest that devastated the country for over a decade. Like many young Liberians born in the United States (because of the war and other political issues), Givens had never traveled to Liberia. Her mother’s family had left the country in the early eighties because of political persecution. They found refuge in the United States. Her (Givens) father had also relocated to the U.S. in the mid eighties. Her parents met while studying in Washington D.C.

In January of 2007, the family made the trip to Liberia. After arriving in the country, Givens remembers feeling “at home”. According to her, everyone she met was “warm and welcoming”. She recalls seeing a lot of poverty. However, people seemed to have a sense of joy “in spite of their circumstances”.

After returning to the U.S., Givens knew that she wanted to give back to Liberia in some way. But she did not know what to do or how to start. While studying Sociology and International Studies in Washington D.C., the chance to do something came. According to Givens, she was approached by her best friend (a Nigerian native) who had previously co-led an Alternative Break to Washington D.C. The Alternative Break is a national program where small groups of college students participate in volunteer services nationally and internationally. Givens was thrilled when she was asked about organizing a trip to Liberia. She gladly accepted the challenge. The two friends collaborated to come up with a theme for the trip, “Women’s Empowerment through (holistic) Education”. After adding a few more details, the two applied to their school’s alternative break office for approval. Givens was nervous. She had just cause. There had never been an Alternative Break trip to Liberia in the history of the program. Many people (she knew) had never heard of the country. She was unsure if anyone would be interested in going. Much to her relief, the trip was approved.

The summer before the trip, the two students began working on detailed plans, including daily activities for volunteers (once in Liberia) and pre trip workshops to help acclimate participants with the country and her people. They also advertised on various mediums such as Facebook and their school’s website in order to find volunteers. About ten students applied. But the ladies faced some obstacles. The trip was costly. Many of the parents thought the trip was to Libya. With political tension in Libya at the time, they were somewhat hesitant to send their children to such a place. The two ladies conducted various fundraising activities to help cover cost.

In December of 2011, a group of about five Alternative Break students arrived in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia. There their work began with various organizations including the Paramount Young Woman’s Initiative (PAYOWI), a Monrovia based group. They participated in a girl’s camp organized by PAYOWI in Robertsport, Liberia. According to Givens one of the highlights of the trip (for her) was a meeting they had with a group of university students, which was organized partially by the country’s Minister of Sports (at the time), Edmonia Tarpeh. According to Givens the youth are politically active. They are “on fire” and “wanting to see change”. She also found them to be very “hopeful”.



Givens pictured in rear with some Alternative Break volunteers and participants at the PAYOWI girl's camp.

Givens says that the trip helped open her eyes to how much need is out there in the world. She says that Liberia is in need of so many basic things, like order. She describes seeing chaos of being the “rule of law”. According to her, it is evident everywhere. One can even see it in the cars that anywhere and the pedestrians who walk everywhere. Another need she sees for the country is an investment in quality education. She feels that it is quite unfortunate that so many young people her age are behind academically because of the war. But like the Liberian university students, she sees hope for the country’s future.

“If enough people are passionate about rebuilding and eliminating corruption, if enough people come together, it can be done quicker.”

For Givens her first trip to Liberia was an eye opening experience that helped her decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. She sees herself as a part of Liberia’s future. Givens hopes to work in educational development in the private sector.



Givens pictured with participants at the PAYOWI girl's camp.

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