

Sam



“I have been waiting for this day since 2006,” the young Liberian native said with a smile. While visiting Liberia for his father’s funeral, Sam Burnett III realized that he had to move back home. The country had been devastated by years of fighting and unrest due to a civil war that began in 1989. It had suffered physical and emotional losses. At the time, the young Liberian was unsure of exactly how the move would happen; but he was quite sure that it would. So when the opportunity came knocking for his dream to become a reality, Burnett could not resist.

During the Christmas holiday season, many Liberians living in the United States (after fleeing the country due to fighting) return home for visits. In

2011, Burnett planned a trip home. However, his was not one to simply visit some friends and family and see his old neighborhood. The young Liberian was on a mission. His goal was to use the country’s love of football to reach out to some of the impoverished country’s many orphans. He planned to spend time with these young people (playing the game they loved) and give out football gear.

Burnett, who was a football coach in United States, was able to use his contacts to collect some much needed contributions of equipment for the trip. However, it was not enough. After mentioning his project to a colleague, he was referred to the Director of Marketing of a nonprofit organization that donates football and other athletic equipment to orphanages in developing areas (in addition to organizing football clinics). The organization, The Give N Go Project, (which was founded by football player, Amber Tollefson) was founded with the belief that “soccer has the capacity to transcend socioeconomic status and serve as the universal language around the world to galvanize communities.” For Burnett, learning about the organization was a blessing. Their philosophy about using soccer to help motivate people was similar to that of his. However, the organization had never done any work in Africa. They had previously been involved in countries in the Caribbean, South and Central America, and the United States.

Not fearing rejection (from the organization about proposing a donation to a new part of the world), Burnett made the contact. He shared his plans with the Director, who then introduced him to others in the organization. Much to his delight, they agreed to sponsor his trip with donations. He was ecstatic.

Burnett left for Liberia with ten bags filled with football equipment; each grossing over 70 pounds in weight. He had identified several orphanages (to benefit from the gifts) with the help of a New York based company, United Liberia Outreach.



Burnett pictured above during his mission in Liberia with some of the children.

Burnett describes the time he spent with the kids as life changing. He saw utter joy on their faces as they received the football gear and participated in the clinics.

“It was one of the best things I’ve ever done in my life, he said.

According to Burnett, the experience left him feeling that this was his life’s calling. It was what God had for him to do. However, as the sun set on each clinic (at the various orphanages) Burnett was saddened by the thoughts shared by some of the kids. They told him that people (like him) show up all the time. They give them things, provide a fun day, and then... they are gone, never to be seen or heard from again. They (the children) had no time to develop genuine relationships.

Immediately Burnett knew that he did not want to be like that. He did not want to simply drop off equipment and leave. He wanted to build relationships with the children and watch them grow. He wanted to be more of an influence in their lives.

After returning from his trip, Burnett was offered the role of Country Director for the Give N Go Project in Liberia. The title would allow him to spear head any of the groups’ projects in Liberia. For the young Liberian, this was a dream come true. Burnett grew up as a fan of football. His late father, Sam Burnett II, had played the sport professionally in Liberia. So the game had always been a part of his life. Now he (Burnett) had the opportunity to use his love and the country’s love for the game to try and impact the lives of young people. Burnett did not hesitate to accept the offer and begin plans for his move.



*1955 Liberia's national football team
Burnett's father pictured in the middle*



Burnett as a child in Liberia

Burnett knows that he may face some hurdles with this move. But he is prepared to meet them head on, he says. One such thing he talks about is a sense of division between local Liberians and those who lived in the diaspora. He recalled attending an event (which was organized by a nonprofit group, geared to helping young girls. His escort (to the event) was a friend who was a local and had not lived in the diaspora. During the evening, he asked for her thoughts about the event. According to him, she felt that the event was nicely organized. However, attending the event, she only saw people who had moved back to Liberia from overseas. She believed that the diaspora group should include be more inclusive of others.

Burnett agrees with his colleague. He too believes that Liberians (like himself) who are now returning home must find ways to relate to locals who never left the country. According to Burnett, some locals view people (like him) as outsiders who are trying to “impose their western ways on them in order to make a profit.” He (Burnett) wants to start changing that perspective.

“Our actions and words have to show local Liberians that we are not outsiders, but victims of circumstances. We had to adapt to a new way of life in a strange country, but are now ready to go back home and be a part of the development process” in order “to see our country reach its full potential. If local Liberians and Liberians in the diaspora do not realize that we are all in this fight together and join as one, there will be unnecessary delays in the development process.

To learn more about Sam and his work with the Give N Go Project, visit the link

<http://www.thegivengoproject.org>

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