

## PREFACE

From October 2000 until November 2002, I lived in Onipanu, Lagos, Nigeria and worked as a prisoners' rights activist.<sup>1</sup> Leaving Nigeria was one of the most difficult things I have had to do. For two years I lived and worked in a country that was extreme at all levels; it was an incredible learning experience, a discovery mission that has changed my life. I discovered more about my own and other people's boundaries than anything else. In my opinion, when a person who has grown up in the "privileged" world of the West lives in a place like Nigeria where people are suffering and struggling to get the simplest, most basic things in life, one cannot help but learn from that struggle.

I saw people struggle to get food and clean drinking water. I saw people go to work everyday on roads full of potholes and on buses packed full of people. I saw people work in offices and banks without access to basic telephone and communication equipment or constant electricity. I saw people struggle all day in the scorching sun to sell what they can so they can bring food home to their children and family members. I saw elderly people get killed crossing the expressway because there are no crosswalks to use to get to the other side of the road. I saw children gathered around a single kerosene lantern at night because there was no other light to use to do homework, and I saw too many children who did not have the "privilege" of doing homework because their parents could not afford to send them to school. I saw those same children on the streets working day and night to sell what they can so their families can survive. I saw babies die of malaria because their parents could not afford the medication. I saw young people who are physically disabled, due to the lack of polio vaccinations, living on

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<sup>1</sup> I worked for Prisoners Rehabilitation and Welfare Action (PRAWA), a Nigerian non-governmental organization with headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria and branch offices in Enugu, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana. I was placed to work with PRAWA through the Canadian Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) office. VSO is a non-governmental organization that places individuals from Canada, England, Uganda, France, the Philippines, the Netherlands, and the United States in non-Western nations to promote "development" while strengthening cross-national global experiences and connectivity. VSO volunteers are paid salaries in currencies and sums that are average to the general public residing in the host nation. As a VSO, I was encouraged to affiliate with the Lagosian, Nigerian community as my primary source of support, understanding, and security.

the streets and using handmade skateboards to mobilize themselves enough to beg for money. I saw people persevere and struggle just to get by. And I saw a lot of smiles and joy throughout that process of survival, along with the frustrations and the despair. I saw the basic human soul persevere and make the best of unnecessarily harsh living conditions in one of the most fertile, oil-producing nations on the African continent. In Lagos, my home for two years, the basic infrastructure is simply not functioning, and it is home to more than 15 million people.

The little things that I saw changing in my thought patterns grew beyond everyday life and brought me into a whole new mindset that looked at the larger political scheme and opened my eyes to the self-interests and self-promotions of the West in its relations with Africa. It got to a point where I was dreading a return to a world that is so sufficient and so convenient that on the surface it was able to orderly revolve around a self-centred almost delusional mentality. And I also got to a point where I came to appreciate the comforts of the Western world but was very aware of the fact that those comforts for the minority in the world are built on the backs and the discomforts of millions. I came to realize and experience the fact that the majority of the people on this planet live in discomfort so that the minority *can* live in comfort.

My work inside the prisons enabled me to meet people who have been “rejected and neglected,” as the prisoners used to say, and I came to see on a new level that the ideals and ways of the West are now ingrained in the social institutions of Africa. The criminal (in)justice system that functions in the self-promoting West is the same criminal (in)justice system that is being forced upon the African people. It is foreign and it is dehumanizing and it is malfunctioning: people wait in prison for years before they are given the “opportunity” to go to court, medical care is almost non-existent, and malnutrition and disease are killing people every day.

While the West continues to flourish and grow, Africa continues to struggle, and leaving Nigeria knowing that was difficult. I felt torn between worlds. I knew I was coming back to a capitalist, corporate, imperialist North American reality, and I knew that that reality is built on the backs of other nations. In this publication, I present my experiences and my interpretations. I am not presenting a mainstream reality, only my version of what I saw. Nigeria is an incredibly complex place, and Africa is an incredibly diverse

continent. I still have so much to learn, to see, to experience and to struggle against, and life in Nigeria has taught me that the journey is more important than the destination. I can delude myself with notions of human rights work and ideas of accomplishments in life, but I can not delude myself for long. Nigeria has shown me that life is about survival. For some it is physical survival, for others it is emotional, cultural, and spiritual survival. For me it became a combination of all those things. There were times when I feared for my physical safety, but those times were few and insignificant. The most significant experiences for me were the times that all my belief systems and perceptions of life were being put into question. Where my thoughts were no longer making sense and where my priorities were being re-numbered.

Nigeria was a place of growth and truth for me, and that has been survival. In a place where the leaders are lying and the average person is dying, I had to search for truth and how to keep growing and I learned that even in the midst of upheaval and struggle, the human spirit prevails. I think I have left Nigeria with a sense of hopelessness for the world but with a sense of renewed hope in the individual. I have left Nigeria, and two years later, I am still adjusting. I know that Nigeria will always be with me in my thoughts, my actions, and my words: I have learned that silence is dangerous when oppression is present, so I continue to speak out knowing that my words are shaped by my journey, and that each story I tell or each experience I reflect on has many sides and several dimensions. Here, I present you with my side, and the dimensions that I encountered.

Thank you to all the people I met in Nigeria. You have all been a part of my incredible experience. I will never forget the emotions and the thoughts and I will forever cherish the strength and perseverance you showed in the face of adversity and struggle. To my family and friends who were not with me during my Nigerian journey, please bear with me as I try to integrate my life and experiences there into a meaningful life here. It will not be easy — I know I have changed — but I also know that these changes were necessary.

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