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TRAVELLERS FOR CHANGE + Global Volunteer Guide

HOW YOU CAN TRAVEL THE WORLD AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

PASSAGE TO AFRICA

Wayn Hamilton is helping Black Nova Scotians connect with their ancestral home, and the source of his peoples' story.

When Wayn Hamilton arrived in the small rural town of Michika, Nigeria in 1984, the security guard at the housing compound where he was to live wouldn't let him in. Hamilton, beginning a posting in the West African nation of 120 million, told the guard he was the Canadian volunteer who would be teaching English at the nearby boarding school. "You can't be the Canadian volunteer," the guard argued, "you're not white."

"He had never seen a Black Canadian," recalls Hamilton, "he didn't think we existed!" The standoff lasted an hour, with Hamilton waiting, suitcases in hand, in the humid, kerosene-scented night air. The school principal was summoned, and once convinced that the Black Canadian did exist, the guard unlocked the lone wooden door cut into the cement wall that surrounded what would be home for the next two years.

Hamilton is from Beechville, an historic black community about half-an-hour's drive from Halifax. He was in Nigeria with CUSO, a Canadian non-profit international development agency that has recruited, trained and placed over 13,000 volunteers in the Third World since 1961.

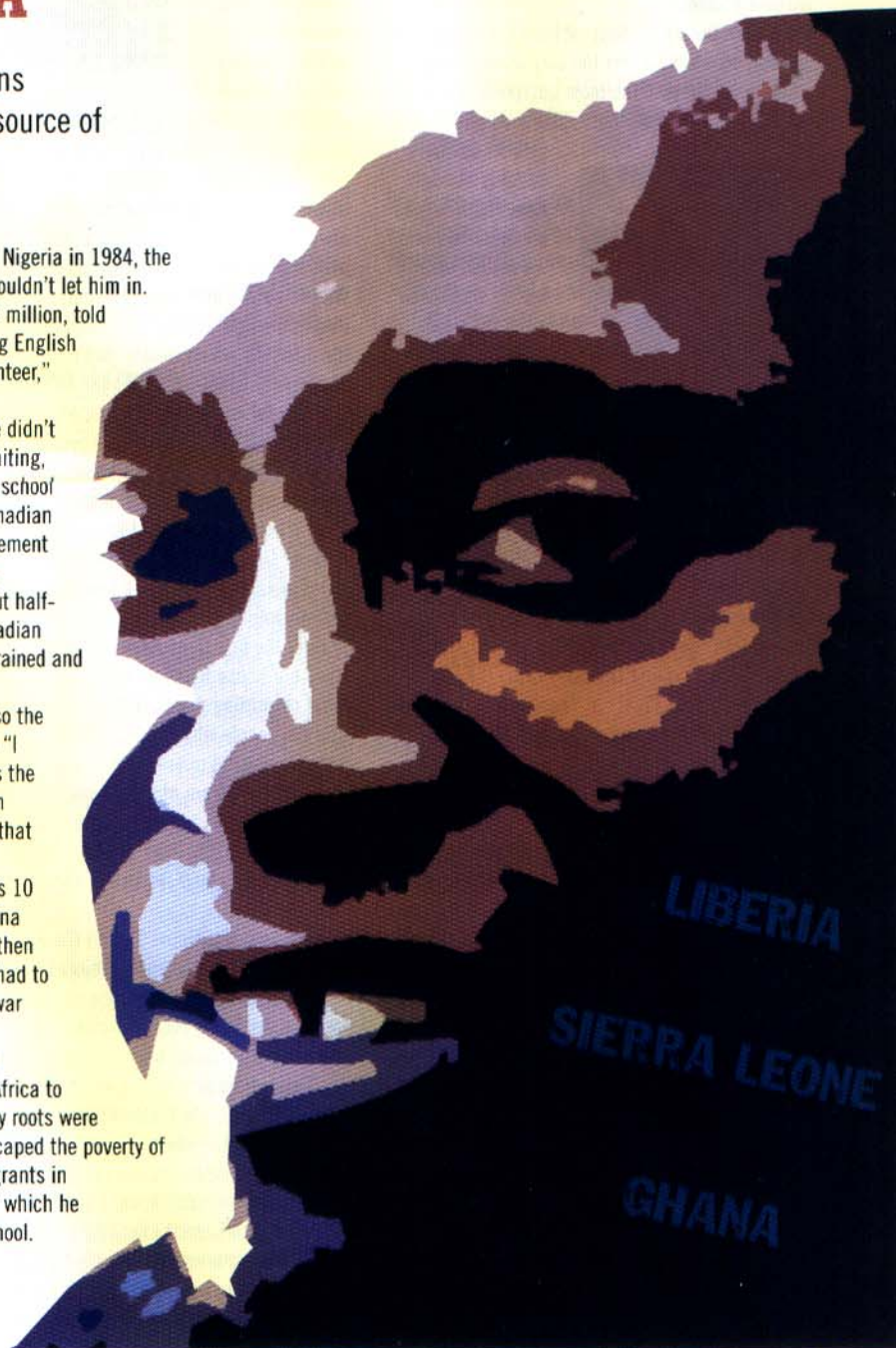
But most of the volunteers sent to Africa have been white, "so the colour of my skin allowed me to be an observer," says Hamilton. "I was more invisible, for lack of a better term, than the volunteers the Nigerians were used to seeing. Eventually, I was welcomed as an African who had come back home. I got to participate in things that were not the norm for Canadian volunteers."

Hamilton has walked through many doors in Africa during his 10 years there, spread over two decades. He worked in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone with CUSO and UNICEF, first as a teacher and then in community development and primary healthcare. In 1995 he had to leave Sierra Leone when the violence of a long-simmering civil war bubbled over into widespread brutality.

Hamilton, who is now the executive director of the provincial government's Office of African Nova Scotians, first travelled to Africa to learn more about his origins. "My mother used to tell me that my roots were very broad." For example, his great, great, great grandfather escaped the poverty of the Southern States in the early 1800s for one of the first land grants in Beechville. "My mom also encouraged me to read about Africa," which he did, on his own, because black history wasn't then taught in school.

He learned that Nova Scotia is home to some of Canada's oldest black communities – thousands fled to its shores after supporting Britain in the U.S. War of Independence. But

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Canadian team when the war in Afghanistan began and we were watching the news reports of this humanitarian crisis unfolding. It was terribly upsetting, I wanted

to do something and not sit back. My teammates were totally into it, so we had all the winners from this one race donate their prize money. Maybe the money raised wouldn't make a huge impact, but at least we weren't turning our backs.

After winning a medal at the Olympics UNICEF Canada invited me to be their spokesperson. I was so flattered. Having just gained some notoriety from Salt Lake City I was able to come back to Canada and raise awareness.

What was your first trip in the field with UNICEF:

I went to Burkina Faso to learn more about a UNICEF girls' education initiative. Most of the population there is rural and relies on subsistence farming. Often it's not feasible for girls to attend school because of the distance to the nearest one, or certain cultural reasons. UNICEF was working to build satellite schools that would make it easier to accommodate them. The issue of education for girls in developing countries is a critical one.

Frustrating moment: I had a hard time initially

when I came home from Burkina Faso, settling into a North American lifestyle, knowing what was going on there, and that few people cared or knew about it.

Inspiring moment: While I was prepared to be shocked by the poverty in Burkina Faso, I was more inspired than ever – just really impressed by what UNICEF was doing to address an important issue there.

Favourite place: Surfing in Baja, Mexico

KATHERINE CROSS, 27

Engineer // Toronto, ON

Cross has participated in a variety of projects with Engineers Without Borders over the past three years. In Bolivia she worked on improving waste management systems, while she focused on



improving access to potable water for indigenous communities in northern Guatemala. She is presently in Ghana helping spread the distribution of treadle

pump technology and educating locals about its use and benefits.

Describe the work you're doing now: First, the

team I am part of was training small manufacturers in northern Ghana how to manufacture manual treadle pumps, or Soka pumps, which are used in small-scale irrigation. Farmers can generally double their plot size, thereby producing more fruit and vegetables, and the pump is less cumbersome than lugging well water in a bucket. Now I will be riding my motorcycle to various communities around Tamale, demonstrating the benefits of the Soka pump to farmers, who are then encouraged to buy them. More than 500 have already been sold in the south.

Rewarding moment: Meeting people from the various communities and seeing their reaction to the treadle pumps, which is usually one of joy and thankfulness. They discuss how they will purchase the pump and in areas where they cannot afford the pump individually, the farmers form their own co-op groups to do so.

PETER HARDIE + KATHLEEN COOPER

Marine Ecologist + Teacher
Moncton, NB

It may have been only a longtime hobby for Hardie and Cooper, but as part of their current two year posting with CUSO they're promoting beekeeping as a way for rural communities to increase food self-sufficiency and earn some extra money. Cooper has previously volunteered in Africa and South America during the summer months with

WAYNE HAMILTON – CONTINUED FROM PAGE 49

many of these Black Loyalists felt betrayed when both the promises of land and the land itself proved barren. So in 1792, over 1,000 Nova Scotia Blacks sailed for Africa. They helped found the modern country of Sierra Leone, today a nation of over four million. They named their capital Freetown.

Hamilton journeyed to the source of his story, and while now settled back in Canada, he knows his overseas posting "will never really be over." His wife, Rugi, is from Sierra Leone, and they live in Waverley, Nova Scotia with their five-year-old son Khalifa. And he keeps in touch with many friends back in Africa.

Connecting Black Nova Scotians to the broader African diaspora has become a mission for Hamilton, a man who looks younger than his years and is often found onstage drumming with African musicians. He teamed up with Karen Hudson, a vice-principal at a Dartmouth high school and mother of two, and Barbara Hamilton-Hinch, Black Student Advisor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Wayne's cousin and also a mother of two.

"We had been talking about how our various experiences as volunteers in Africa had changed us," says Hamilton, "and we thought, wouldn't it be great to give other African Nova Scotians the same opportunity. What if they could see what we saw, understand the bigger picture, witness first-hand the positive side of Africa, not just the negative we get from TV."

With the support of private donors, CUSO and the Nova Scotia government, the "Roots to West Africa" project was planted in the black community. A group of nine African Nova Scotians – teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, youth and community workers – spent one month in the summer of 2003 in Ghana. Hamilton was the lead facilitator. "My job was to open a door; it's up to the individuals to keep it propped open."

While there, they met with rural organizations, business agencies, women's groups and AIDS workers. The goal, he says, was to foster human linkages, to hook people emotionally on Africa. "Person-to-person relationships are very important to most Africans," says Hamilton. The

Ghanaians were "deeply touched that we had travelled all that way just to shake their hands."

In Kumasi, a traditional ruler told the visiting Nova Scotians they were the embodiment of *sankofa*, a word meaning a return to your cultural roots. "This ruler also told us of a place we had to visit, to better understand our past," says Hamilton. "He said we had to go back before we could go forward."

That place was a slave encampment in northern Ghana. From there the captives were crowded into "slave castles" along the coast of West Africa, and finally forced below decks of leaking, stagnant ships bound for the harsh truth of the new world. The site is preserved by local custodians who pass on the oral histories of their nation's ghosts.

The Nova Scotians squeezed into the squalid quarters the slaves lived in, if live is the word that can be used. They sought shade under trees that prisoners were chained to, the roots still cemented into the hard-baked soil. They touched the punishment seat, a stone where troublemakers were shackled and forced to face the biting African sun. The rock was deeply pitted from use.

"It was a moving experience," says Hamilton, "and difficult. We usually stood in dead silence. It was the start of the journey for my ancestors, and here we were returning."

Back in Nova Scotia, the Canadian participants have pledged to fundraise for African development projects, and to educate the public about Africa and the links to Black Nova Scotia. The organizers are aiming for another tour in two years, and want to include Sierra Leone in the travel plans.

For Wayne Hamilton, the personal journey from the past to the present to the future also continues. Now that stability has settled on Sierra Leone thanks to a peace accord and international peacekeepers, he and Rugi hope to soon take their five-year-old to Sierra Leone to visit his other home.

Hamilton wants to take Khalifa, which translates as successor, through a few doors of his own.

- SEAN KELLY