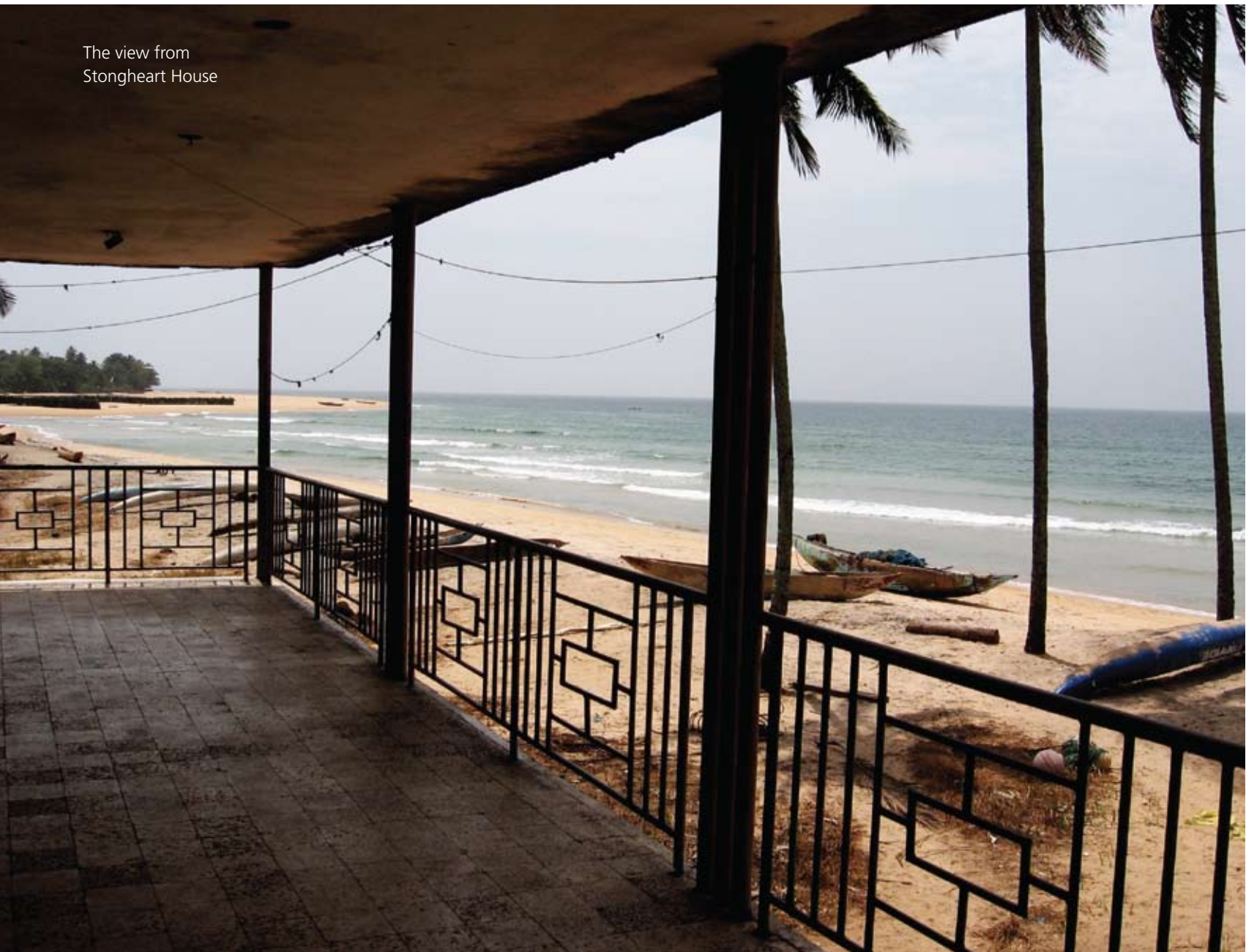


CIVIL ACTION

Liberia's civil war ended in 2003, but the devastating effects are still being lived by the thousands who endured it. *Sara Mohazzebi* meets the woman making a difference



The view from
Stongheart House



Her skin, a dark rich brown that glows, is reminiscent of an elite model and when her face breaks into a smile, I can see this girl being plastered on the covers of fashion magazines. But seated across from me in the late hours of the night at a hip Los Angeles coffee shop is not a girl who has led the charmed life of a fashionista or even a regular girl for that matter. Lovetta Conto, despite looking every bit a healthy and happy 15-year-old girl, has been a refugee for almost her entire life. When she was only four, a brutal civil war was tearing apart her native Liberia and Lovetta eventually fled with her father to Ghana. Lovetta's mother did not want to leave Liberia and chose to stay behind but Lovetta's father wanted a better life for his daughter and so they walked to safety. Her father, who was raised to always make

education a priority, refused to let Lovetta give up hope on a brighter future for herself. "In Africa, everywhere you turn, you are told, 'It ain't gonna happen.' But my father kept saying, 'Walk. It's going to happen,'" says Lovetta as she describes her journey to Ghana. Once they found refuge at the Buduburam Camp, which housed 47,000 Liberian refugees, life did not seem much more promising and while Lovetta was no longer living amongst the daily cruelties of war, a dismal future was all that appeared on the horizon.

Ironically, had civil war never ripped apart Liberia, Lovetta and thousands of girls like herself would have grown up in one of the most progressive, educated, and resource rich countries on the continent. Liberia, located on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa, bordering the Cote D'Ivoire,

Guinea and Sierra Leone, is the only country in sub-saharan Africa never to have known colonial rule in the 160 years of its existence as a republic. Prior to 14 years of civil war which ended in 2003, it was a country that was committed to education, preservation of African culture, and attracted a range of national and international scholars. In particular, the idyllic coastal town of Robertsport, situated just 3 hours north of the capital, was where scholars and everyday citizens, regardless of religion or class, resided in harmony. Now, this very same town is home to dozens of children who were abducted and forced into battle rather than given the opportunity to be educated and stable and the various schools lack tables, books, and even walls. After such a prolonged period of war, Liberia's infrastructure and human capital quickly crumbled. The lack of clean

running water, electricity and safe bridges and roads throughout the country has taken a serious toll on the current population of 3.4 million. Filled with lush rainforest, Liberia is also the rainiest country in West Africa and has a rainy season that lasts from May to October. Without proper bridges and roads, many Liberians are often trapped in their communities and have no method of transportation to nearby regions that they need access to. For a country that is blessed with a plethora of natural resources including diamonds, coffee, coal, rubber and coconuts, it is devastating to see just how far it has fallen in less than two decades.

But with insurmountable obstacles also comes enormous opportunity for change, and Lovetta's long walk to safety would ultimately lead her to another life-changing event. In 2004, Cori Stern, a Hollywood screenwriter, was doing activist work in neighbouring Nigeria and decided to go to Ghana for a holiday. But when she came across the Buduburam Camp, her holiday came to a quick end when she saw how great the needs of the camp were. Cori decided to return shortly and with money raised with friends, a free school was built for the children. On this second trip, Cori met Lovetta and they instantly connected. With the camp set to close in 2008 after 18 years and many refugees distraught by what to do next, Cori was inspired to create the Strongheart House, a home for exceptional youths from extremely difficult life circumstances who have been orphaned or displaced by conflict, with Lovetta as the first Strongheart fellow. The Strongheart programme would be geared to educate and develop its fellows in their transformation as social leaders, citizens and entrepreneurs and would support each youth in creating a project that would assist themselves and their community. When asked what had propelled her to aid Lovetta and the Strongheart initiative, Cori reveals that: "I was a Strongheart kid. I did not have an easy childhood and at one point was even homeless. I have always wanted to create a house where kids from challenging situations could come together and plant strong and healthy roots within themselves and each other. When I met Lovetta, I knew it was time to fulfil that dream. Behind everything I do, it is my connection with each kid that makes it impossible for me not to get involved and in every kid that I aid, I find that there is an inner resilience that does not fade no matter what the external conflict may be." Cori soon teamed up with Zoe Adams, a former TV executive colleague and fellow activist, and set out to find the



A young boy with
an amputated leg

ideal location for the home. Robertsport, with its incredible potential for ecotourism, especially as a surfing and beach destination, and a peaceful Muslim and Christian community of 6,000 was exactly what they were looking for. Town meetings open with a Muslim prayer and end with a Christian prayer and Muslims help rebuild the roofs of the churches for the town's Christians. Another important component of what confirmed Robertsport and Liberia as the setting of the Strongheart House was that the new Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was leading the country in

taking huge strides in transitioning Liberia from conflict to genuinely reconstructing the social and physical infrastructure of the country. The Liberian people, after finally having the war end in 2003, are tired of war and the business of war. What they are ready for is to transform their country for the good of their people, their children and their future.

In late 2007, Cori learned of NACA (National Association for Grand Cape Mountainians), an expat diaspora based in North America, that was in their second year

The View of
Robertsport
from abandoned
dormitory



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of an intensive on-ground evaluation and was very committed to the reconstruction of their home country. Thus far, NACA has paid for and reopened St. Timothy's Hospital and is in the process of rebuilding a major and crucial bridge. After meeting, the Strongheart Fellowship and NACA decided to partner up and develop Plan 180, an extensive global initiative that not only thoroughly revitalizes Robertsport into a sustainable and innovative town but also addresses the health and educational needs of the county's five districts plus one major initiative. Plan 180 and the Strongheart House will respectively launch and open in September 2008 with the assistance and help of individuals, NGOs, think tanks, major and independent corporations, and Liberian citizens. While at times, the needs

of the community are huge and not easy to address, Zoe points out that: “Big projects just need to be broken down into simple steps. The best way to tackle each issue that is facing each respective community ranging from sanitation to healthcare is to determine what is needed, how much it costs, and then figure out the most effective way to get it executed.” For example, in Liberia, all eggs are imported because the chickens are malnourished. However, all over the Liberian ground are coconuts and coconuts make excellent chicken feed. The knowledge of how to take care of things and come up with solutions was lost in the long and harrowing years of the war but with support and research can be rapidly brought back. Furthermore, both the Strongheart Fellowship and NACA are

working for a shift in attitude regarding aid and reconstruction, one in which sustainability and transformation are the key factors rather than just doling out aid. Cori is adamant that what NACA and the Strongheart Fellowship are creating is “about a hand up and not a hand out. It is disabling to solely do something for someone else because then they are not developing the muscles and skills to do it themselves. What Liberia needs is the support and knowledge to find simple solutions to the problems they are faced with while coupling that with tradition and roots.” To see the future and potential of these two initiatives, one doesn't need to look further than Lovetta, who has just spent the past year and a half on a scholarship in the US and will be



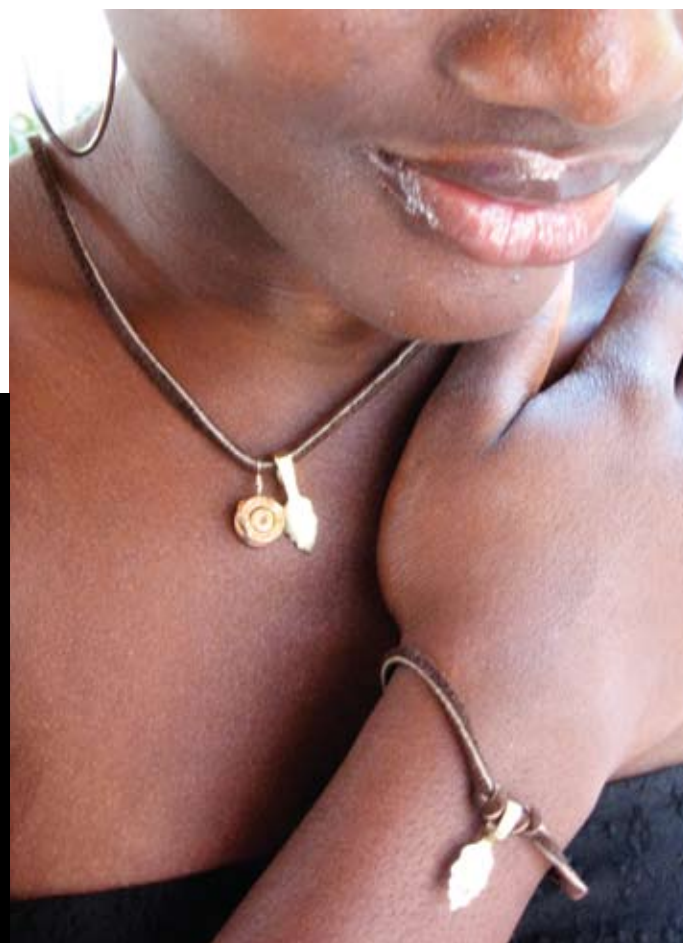
Lovetta with her father

moving to Liberia to take residence in the Strongheart House and to help build the town of Robertsport and her country into a vibrant and educated region once more. The Strongheart House, which Cori refers to as “a microcosm of a world that works” is situated on the beach and is being renovated into a 13 bedroom, 6 bathroom home where youths ranging from ages 13 to 18 will be given the opportunity to truly develop the skills they need to produce the best life for themselves and their community. The Strongheart House currently has accepted seven youths starting with Lovetta and the Freeman family, a family of six children from the Buduburam camp that stayed together despite losing their mother and managed to run a successful business on the camp to provide for their family. While the current fellows are all Liberian refugees, Cori and Zoe are actively searching for youths from around the world who have overcome extreme situations and have the desire and commitment to contribute to their own positive advancement on a global level.

As Lovetta and I finish our coffee so that she can catch her flight back to Africa to prepare for the next chapter of her life in Liberia, I can't help but notice the unique necklace and matching bracelet of a gold leaf and bead adorning her. Lovetta, with her innate sense of design, has taken bullet casings and melted them into a leaf and

For more information, go to www.strongheartfellowship.org and www.akawelle.com

engraved the word LIFE into the pendant. The bead is the actual bottom of a bullet shell. Lovetta buys the used bullets from a man in Liberia and what she pays him funds his children through school. The necklace and bracelet comprise Lovetta's aptly-titled jewellery line Akawelle (which stands for also 'known as love' in the Liberian language of Kpelle) and weave Lovetta's difficult past with the hopes of her happy future. The jewellery line is Lovetta's Strongheart project and the proceeds fund her educational needs and also contribute to the house itself. “My jewellery is proof that my father was right. That good can come after something as bad as war and that life goes on.” I say goodbye to Lovetta and as she walks away, she reminds me of the saying, ‘You can't go back and make a brand new start but you can start over and make a brand new ending.’ If anyone is a living example of starting from rock bottom and catapulting yourself with sheer will and determination to the very top, it's this girl who turns back to me, smiles, and says “I hope for everyone to come to the new Liberia that we will be building. My country is something you must see in this life”. One look into her eyes and I don't doubt her for a second. ■



Lovetta with her Akawelle necklace and bracelet line.

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