

University Women run for Sierra Leone

By Helen Fallon



Back (l to r) Helen Fallon, Josephine Finn, Deirdre Beecher, Anne Marie Smith Front (l to r) Petra Schurenhofer and Etain Ó'Siocháin

On Monday June 4, 2007 six fighting fit women took part in the Dublin mini marathon in aid of women's education projects in Sierra Leone. The group raised £2,200 for Sister Celia's work. This was presented to her on the July 12 while she was in Ireland on leave.

Sister Celia's Work

The work of Sister Celia Doyle was featured in *Outlook* September/October 2005. Helen Fallon returned to Sierra Leone in a personal capacity in April 2006. She revisited the camp for displaced people at Grafton outside Freetown and talked to Kumba, the chairwoman of the camp, about the changes a weaving project is making to her life and the lives of other women in the camp.

Kumba's story

My life is better now. I can earn a living from what I make and I know that I can make a life anywhere I want from what I have learned. My children are going to school. I pay for books and for uniforms. The other women are reporting their lifestyle has also changed. Before I used to go up and down walking and talking without no good reason but now because I am busy with sewing and weaving, I don't quarrel, I don't have much talk, I sit down and work. I am employed as a teacher here on Mondays and Wednesdays. I teach other women weaving so that they can become self-reliant. There have been great changes in the camp with this project -less trouble, less idleness.

The men are jealous of us. Now we tell them that without them we can stand and live. What a man can do a woman can also do it. When a woman is earning money she is helping the family. When the children go to school if the Dad is still alive people will look at him and say

"Ah. This man is doing well. The children are going to school." So if he made this woman stay at home his secret will be out!

The war is far away now. We don't think about it so much. When we came to this camp first we were often thinking about what happened and about our villages and homes that were destroyed in the war. A while ago I saw one rebel who had captured and held myself and other women. He recognised me.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"I have no job," he said. "What about you?"

"Well now I am working doing weaving."

"Do you have one hundred leones?" he asked.

"I will make it two hundred leones," I said.

I forgave him and told him I have forgiven him. I forgive him because he never harmed anyone among us when we were captured. Although he was a rebel he did not rape or torture anyone.

During the war my four children were scattered. My cousin met one on the road and she took him. I had given up my daughters for dead. Someone recognised them in the camp in Guinea and told them "Your mother is still alive." They all came to the camp in Grafton to be with me. I am grateful to God for that. My husband became ill and died during the war.

We have shelter now but we need to build more permanent houses. We will use some of the money from the weaving and sewing for that. We will open a bank account and if we sell a crochet bag for ten thousand leones we will take five thousand and put the rest in the account. This will give us a start for our houses. That is what I am planning and I want us to open the account in May. Several women have

agreed but some do not even know what is an account.

"How can I put my money where I am not seeing it?" some are saying.

So I have to teach them. Then we will have interest on the money. After one or two years we will have some more money.

We are negotiating with the minister for lands to be allowed to stay here. At first the people who were here before us in Grafton village told us that they did not want us here. But the minister told them the land did not belong to them. They also came here as displaced people after the Second World War and the land was allocated to them by the government, so they have no right to drive us out.

There are three schools here now and they are trying to build a secondary school. I want my children to get a good education. I went to school for a while but my parents did not value education. I was right in the classroom when my father came in and took me by the arm and brought me to my future husband. That was 1972. He said to the teacher "My daughter is not for learning, she is for marriage."

I was made to marry one Mister Kemoh. Mister Kemoh already had seven wives. Some of his children were older than me. I was fifteen when this happened. I ran away many times and was always sent back. When I was eighteen my father let me leave husband because he knew I would never settle with him. Then I married Mr. George Lewis. I had four children with him. He died shortly after the war began.

My children are Edith, James, Rebecca and Momodu. They are all in school because of my sewing and weaving. I say thank you to God Almighty and I say thank you to Sister Celia for this work which has changed all our lives.