

Wheelchairs to Sierra Leone

Here we are back from Sierra Leone after some experiences, I for one will not soon forget. The trip to Lungi was uneventful, the fun started at the Lungi airport with the folks there wanting to help with our baggage and to get us on our way. This actually looks like a mob and they fight over who is going to carry your bags, all this to eventually earn a “tip”. Then it’s on to Immigration and Customs. When they found out we were there for wheelchairs distribution, we breezed past. Fr Michael was waiting for us outside and had everything looked after for the next part of the trip. He had hired a cab to get us down to the ferry a 35 minutes drive, followed by a one hour ferry crossing, then another 30 minutes drive in Freetown to get to our accommodations.

As soon as we stepped off the airplane, we could feel the intense heat. It was 30+ and the humidity was at 80% or better. It was like a blast furnace coming from -30 degrees.



The next morning brought some recipients to our door. The first one we had met on the street the day before and had told him to come and get a chair. His friend who had a chair that was in very sad shape also received a new chair. We handed out a total of 31 chairs that day.

On day 2, we went to meet Msgr Gandhi and his staff, got the low down on the plan for distribution and were told to meet again for Diner at 7:00 pm. We then went back to our hotel, co-located at the wheelchairs storage facility and unpacked chairs to get ready for the next day. At supper, we met 3 gentlemen, members of the Knights of St John and discovered that the goals and principles of their order are quite similar to ours. We also met more priests from the diocese.





It was an experience to remember. There is nothing like helping someone that arrived dragging themselves on the ground using only their hands for motion and you help them into a chair, then that person, with tears in their eyes, reach for your hand and kiss it. It makes it all worth it. We were provided with certificates and disposable cameras to record every donation. We had people from 4 to 48 years old come and get chairs.

The next day, Saturday was some of the same except that the word was out that we were giving out wheelchairs and the crowd assembled early.

By the end of Saturday, we had distributed

61 chairs. After we had cleaned up our work space and were gathered to make plans for supper, I fell ill and fainted; I had to be taken to the hospital for an overnight stay, complete with I.V. I was diagnosed with suffering from a heatstroke.



When released from the hospital on Sunday morning, we met as a group and decided that it would be safer if Reg and I returned home early. We had discussion about the trip to Bo and the road conditions, the fact that the vehicle was not Air Conditioned and not knowing the level of medical care available worried us should I have a relapse or if someone else got sick. Contacts and arrangements were made to travel back to Canada.



Monday was spent doing souvenir shopping and visiting travel agencies to get our tickets changed. Travel in Freetown is difficult at the best of time, traffic is constantly bumper to bumper and you don't move very fast. On our travel, we saw some of the people we had



given wheelchairs to. I remember this lady in particular because she had to look her best before we took her picture. When she recognized us in the SUV, she chased us down the road so she could thank us again.



After Reg and I left, Mike headed to Bo to meet up with Fr Tony while Fr Michael dealt with some travel issues in preparation for a trip to Canada.

As part of our luggage, traveling to Sierra Leone, we all had taken some extra items for Fathers Michael and Tony. Fr Tony, here in Canada, had been gathering some computers and printers for a school in the Bo area. Mike and Fr Tony visited that school to bring this equipment comprised of a generator for electricity, gas to operate it and some supplies like ink and paper for the

printers. I am sure that this made the staff's day at the school.

It was then on to Bo for wheelchair distribution of some 58 chairs, handed out to folks who needed them. Fr Tony was part of that distribution taking time out of his family holiday to be part of that event. It was now time for Mike to return to Canada. After a day of relaxation, that even included a dip in the Atlantic Ocean, the long journey back began. Travel across Freetown, the ferry across the river and the 8 or so hour flight to London were he spent 2 days with family before returning to Canada.

I should also mention that Reg landed himself in the hospital on return to Canada. He had a number of health issues needing attention but you can talk with him on that.

I could go on and on about our experiences in Sierra Leone. I can tell you that I will never forget the warm welcome we received there from the people of Sierra Leone. They are poor by North American standards but I think that most of them do well enough and live comfortably by Sierra Leone standard. I have just scratched the surface on this and you can ask us all the questions you want, we will do our best to answer everything for you. I thank you for your generosity in providing the funds required for the chairs so Reg, Mike and I could experience the humanitarian feeling.





Reginald J. Nieszner 1949 - 2008

Shortly after our return to Canada, our Grand Knight, Reg Nieszner fell ill and entered the Moose Jaw Union hospital. A week later he was transferred to Regina General Hospital, and after many tests and several doctors, Reg made his final trip. On 22 Feb, in the early afternoon surrounded by family, he left us for his eternal reward. Reg will be sadly missed by his family, by all the people whose life he interacted with and by his Brothers Knights.

Under his leadership Fr Gilpin Council flourished we have many projects on the go and fundraising efforts are paying off. A good example is this project that saw us raise \$28,000 for "Wheelchair Foundation Canada" in record time. Reg was proud to be a Knight and was proud of Council 9760. He always wanted us to be on the leading edge. We are the first Council in Canada to distribute wheelchairs out of the country. We were the first one to donate to the Saskatchewan K of C Charitable Foundation new education fund created this year to honor the 100 years of Knighthood in Saskatchewan. And the list goes on.

Please consider donating to Wheelchair Foundation Canada to continue the work started by Reg