

# KIMMIE WEEKS

CHILD RIGHTS HERO NOMINEE PAGES 90-109

## WHY HAS KIMMIE BEEN NOMINATED?

Kimmi Weeks has been nominated for the 2013 World's Children's Prize because he has spent over 20 years, since he was ten years old, fighting for the rights of the child, especially for children affected by war.

WHILE FLEEING in wartime Liberia, Kimmie almost died of cholera. There and then he pledged to spend his whole life helping disadvantaged children. Kimmie and his friends founded 'Voice of the Future' and learned about the rights of the child. When Kimmie was 16 they organised a campaign to disarm the child soldiers in the civil war. This contributed to the liberation of 20,000 child soldiers. One year later, Kimmie had to flee. He had revealed that the newly elected President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was recruiting child soldiers to the Liberian army. The President tried to have Kimmie killed. As a refugee in the USA, Kimmie continued his work for children affected by war, not only in Liberia but also in other countries, primarily Sierra Leone and Uganda. Kimmie and other young people now run an organisation called Youth Action International. YAI helps vulnerable children, providing a home for orphans, rehabilitation of child soldiers, education, health care and more. YAI also lobbies governments and parliaments to promote respect for the rights of the child.



**When the war in Liberia begins, Kimmie Weeks is eight years old and flees from his home with his mother. In the refugee camp outside the capital city of Monrovia, Kimmie comes close to dying of cholera after drinking contaminated water. He survives and pledges to spend his whole life helping children who are suffering because of war. He has kept that promise.**

“**B**ut woman, your child is dead. He’s not breathing any more,” says a man to Kimmie’s mother in the refugee camp. He takes the little body from her and carries it away.

Finally, Kimmie’s mother gathers the strength to get up and go looking for her son’s body. When she finds it among people who have died, she shakes it. Miraculously, Kimmie wakes up.

Twenty years later, Kimmie Weeks is known for his commitment to helping children who have grown up in war zones.



FOTO: CHRIS HONDROS/GETTY IMAGES

**One evening, after boys with weapons banged on the door of the home Kimmie shared with his mother, they decided to flee.**



## War is coming

At the beginning of this story, Kimmie goes to school. He always sits at the front so he can hear the teacher and answer quickly if he is asked a question. He loves learning new things and knows that he is smart. He doesn't care that his classmates tease him, saying that they can't see what the teacher writes on the chalkboard because Kimmie's big ears are in the way.

Rumours begin to spread that rebels have crossed the border. On TV, the President talks about confiscated weapons and images of burnt out villages are shown.

"We have come to free the people of Liberia. It will take three days and there will be no bloodshed," says rebel leader Charles Taylor on the radio.

"I'm afraid," says Kimmie, and his mother tries to comfort him.

But things don't calm down. Quite the opposite happens. Rockets start hitting houses, and gunfire goes on for hours at a time.

## Had to flee

Kimmie and his mother spend more and more time hiding on the floor. Then one evening, an explosion shakes the whole house. Shortly afterwards there is banging on the door. Fifty armed men and boys are standing outside. None of them wear uniforms, but they have weapons slung over their shoulders. One of them says:

"We have come to free Liberia. Stay inside!"

As soon as the rebels have gone, Kimmie and his mother sneak out the back door. They follow the flow of people fleeing in silent terror. There are checkpoints everywhere, and at each one someone is beaten or killed.

Kimmie and his mother manage to pass the checkpoints. Sometimes Kimmie's

mother covers his eyes with her hands. They can smell the dead bodies among the gum trees.

They reach a university, which has been transformed into a refugee camp. Kimmie looks around in shock. There are sick children crying, and people with empty looks on their faces, staring into space. The stench makes Kimmie sick. They manage to find an empty bit of floor in one of the buildings, and it becomes their home.

Kimmie and his mother have nothing with them. They have to beg for food from other refugees, and they hunt for edible leaves and roots. The water they manage to get hold of is not clean, but they have no choice but to drink it. That's when Kimmie gets cholera and becomes so ill that people think he's dead.

## Wheelbarrow return

When they hear on the radio after many months of war that the country is at peace, Kimmie is still so weak that he is brought home in a wheelbarrow. Their house is empty. Everything they owned has been stolen or destroyed.

As soon as he has his strength back, Kimmie starts helping children affected by the war. He gathers the children in his area and suggests that they tidy up all the debris left by the war. The children make an enthusiastic start and all the people living in the area are delighted.

Their next task is to provide food for the residents of the area. Although the war is

over, it's hard to get hold of food. The UN troops, who are there to keep the peace, distribute food parcels. Kimmie leads a group of children on a walk to their headquarters, several kilometres away, to ask for food parcels to be given out in their area too. Although the soldiers say there are not enough food parcels, Kimmie and other children keep walking there every day to ask. Finally, the people in charge give in. The very next day, they bring supplies to Kimmie's area. Everyone cheers.

## Children must be heard!

Every time Kimmie and the other children manage to achieve something, they feel good and it gives them strength to keep going. A UN peacekeeper gives Kimmie a copy of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"Wow! Do you know what? Us children have rights!" says Kimmie to the other children. "We have to make sure that they are respected here too!"

Together the children start an organisation called 'Voice of the Future', and their slo-

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After returning home, Kimmie and a group of children set up the organisation "Voice of the Future". Kimmie suggests that they should focus on stopping children from being used as soldiers.





Many homes were destroyed by the war. One of the first things Kimmie and his friends did was to clear up all the mess from the war.

gan is: ‘Children should be seen and heard!’ They take one article at a time from the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They knock on doors and talk to everyone they meet about the rights of the child. Since no children have ever done anything like this in Liberia, they become famous.

When they come to Article 38 of the Convention, which says that children should not be used as soldiers, Kimmie realises they have an important task ahead of them. All of them saw child soldiers during the war. At the next ‘Voice of the Future’ meeting, Kimmie suggests:

“We have to stop children from being used as soldiers!”

The children agree to demonstrate and try to persuade the rebel leaders to release all child soldiers. They start the ‘Children’s Disarmament Campaign’ with the slogan: ‘We can’t hold pens while our friends hold weapons’.

### Disarm the children!

Kimmie and two other boys go off to see the rebels with a cassette player. When they approach a checkpoint, they put their hands up to show that they are unarmed, shouting:

“We want to talk to your commanders.”

The rebels think they are spies and force them onto the

ground. On one occasion the soldiers shoot the ground, right between the children’s feet. The children are so scared that they wet their pants and the rebels laugh scornfully. Sometimes Kimmie and the others are kept locked up for hours. But finally they always get to meet the commander and ask their question:

“Are you planning to disarm all the children in your army?”

All the commanders reply that they will do that, and Kimmie records their promises on the cassette player. The children then go to radio stations and ask them to broadcast the rebel leaders’ promises on the news. Kimmie is interviewed on radio and says:

“To all you children who are soldiers in this war, Voice of the Future says to you: All the promises that you will benefit from the war, and that it will make you rich, are just lies!”

The Children’s Disarma-

ment Campaign is successful, and over 20,000 children are set free.

### The President’s child soldiers

By now Kimmie is 15. All their successes motivate the young child rights activists to do even more. People know who they are and what they are fighting for. Children have never before managed to make the people who run the country change their minds.

The country is at peace, and rebel leader Charles Taylor has been elected president, despite the fact that it was him who started the war. Kimmie hears a rumour that the national army has started training children to be soldiers at a military base near the airport. He takes the cassette player and jumps in a taxi.

“Can you drive me to the military base and wait outside please,” he asks the driver. When they arrive, Kimmie says to the guard:

“I have business here,” and



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### Disarm the children!

Kimmie and the other children in “Voice of the Future” got the commanders of the various armies to promise to disarm all their child soldiers. On the radio, Kimmie said to the child soldiers: “All the promises about you benefitting from the war are just lies!”



**Kimmie set up the organisation Youth Action International when he was a refugee in the United States. He returned to Liberia and can work there together with YAI to fulfil his promise to help children affected by war.**

the guard lets him in. Soon he sees the training field. 500 boys are marching back and forth, carrying fake wooden rifles. They lift their wooden rifles and pretend to shoot. Kimmie goes straight to the soldier who is leading the training and says:

“Good afternoon sir! My name is Kimmie Weeks. Could I talk to some of the children here?”

“Sure, talk away. We’ll take a break,” says the soldier and walks over to his office. Kimmie starts recording.

“I come from Grand Bassa,” says the first boy. “They came to get me, and said that I would get good training and I could help Liberia wage war in Sierra Leone.” The others tell similar stories.

Once Kimmie has talked to twenty of the boys he hears someone shouting:

“Pikin (little boy), come here! You have no right to be

here! Come heeere!”

But Kimmie doesn’t turn round. He runs as fast as he can through the gate to the waiting taxi and tells the driver to step on it. Kimmie realises that his recordings are going to be difficult for President Taylor to explain away.

#### **President’s death threats**

Kimmie goes to the Minister for Justice and says:

“What are you doing, training 500 children to be soldiers?”

The Minister replies:

“That’s a question for the President!”

Kimmie gets to meet President Charles Taylor at his office. Kimmie goes alone, because nobody else in the child rights group dares

go with him. They know that people who have criticised President Taylor have disappeared and been found dead.

Kimmie steps through the door and finds himself face to face with Charles Taylor. He is overcome with fear, but he doesn’t show it. He says that he has seen child soldiers in training and that this has to stop, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. President Taylor flies into a rage and leans towards Kimmie shouting:

“I’ll tell you something my young friend, if you do anything about this, you are at risk of disappearing, do you understand?”

“I understand, Mr President,” replies Kimmie and hurries out. He can’t help

checking to see if he’s being followed. But whatever the President said, this news has to get out.

#### **Passport for escape**

The next day, Kimmie organises a press conference. He talks about what he has seen and recorded at the military base. The story makes headline news in all the newspapers and on radio and TV. The President denies that the army is training children, and says that it is Kimmie who is a ‘threat to Liberia’s security’.

The President’s security service watches Kimmie. Soldiers pop up outside his office. They sneak around outside his mother’s house. They come to school. Kimmie realises he is in danger. He no longer dares to sleep in the same place for more than one night. Then Kimmie gets a letter from the

**Kimmie as a hero on crisp packets in Liberia.**





**Ballots – not bullets.**

➔ US Embassy, asking him to attend a meeting.

“We want to help you leave Liberia,” says the ambassador. “It’s too dangerous for you here. President Taylor has already interrogated your friends, and people are looking out for you at the airport and the harbour.”

“All this for little old me!” thinks Kimmie in amazement. “All I wanted to do was help the children in Liberia!”

The next day Kimmie

leaves, disguised as a traditional dancer, with a dance troupe that is going on tour. The ambassador has given him a false passport. They let him off at the border and the border guard says:

“Welcome to Côte d’Ivoire!”

Kimmie can relax. He is safe.

**Doesn’t forget his promise**

Six months later, Kimmie is able to fly to the USA. He is

alone, and far away from his beloved mother. At first he flips burgers in Delaware. But soon he manages to get into a good school where he gets top grades, and can go on to university.

But Kimmie hasn’t forgotten his promise to help children affected by war. Along with a few other students, he starts Youth Action International (YAI). This is an organisation where young people support children and young people affected by war, not only in Liberia but in other countries too.

Five years later, Kimmie is able to return to Liberia for the first time. The war is over and Charles Taylor has fled to Nigeria.

Kimmie’s mother doesn’t

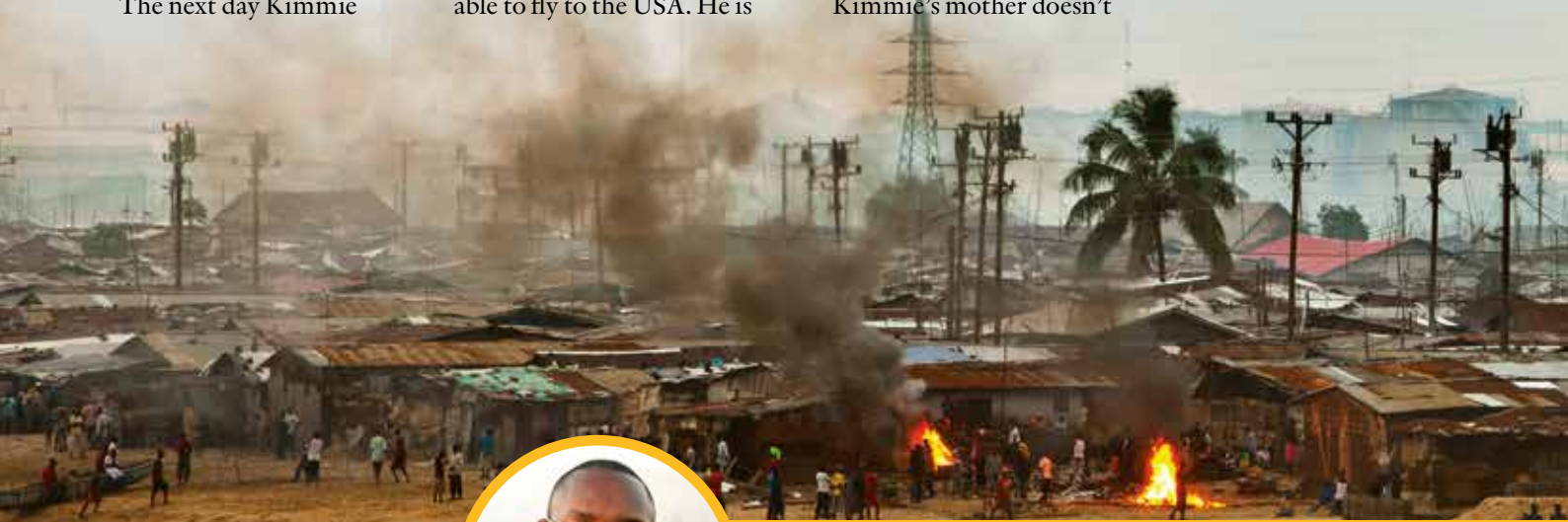
know he’s coming home. When he steps out of the car and walks up to their house, the neighbours come running, shouting:

“Kimmie’s back!”

His mother comes out of the house to see what all the fuss is about. They hug each other and cry tears of joy.

Most people would have chosen to stay in the US and live a more comfortable life there, but Kimmie came home.

“Liberia is my home,” he says. “I was almost one of the children who died in the war. Don’t forget that every child who dies because of war or famine could have been a person who made the world a better place.”



**KIMMIE’S ADVICE TO YOUNG PEOPLE:**

## Be like an ant!

**KIMMIE IS INVITED** to speak at events all over the world. Every year, over 40,000 young people get to hear him. The money he earns is used to cover the costs of projects in Liberia and the other African countries where YAI works. His advice to young people is:

1. Find out what you want to get involved in.
2. Find a link between you and the thing you want to support.
3. Don’t get involved in something just because other people are. Think for yourself!

4. Fantasise about what you want to do in life, for yourself and for others, and work hard to achieve it.

Kimmie often says:

“When war breaks out, it’s as though life presses the pause button. You can’t live for real. Life stands still because of fear.”

“Be like an ant, not like a grasshopper! Ants build, grasshoppers eat up the things other people have planted.”

“We want to build a bridge from ‘I can’t’ to ‘I can’. Everything is possible.”

Liberia is all we have. Let’s say no to violence.



# Clean water for all!

Kimmie almost died because of dirty water. That's why he wants to make sure all children get clean water to drink:

**"Before the war we had water for our houses in Monrovia. But the rebel soldiers destroyed all the water pipes." Everyone in Monrovia still has to buy water for drinking, washing, and doing laundry and dishes.**

**WATER DELIVERER** Ojuku Weah takes orders and delivers containers of water every day.

"One family usually buys 10 gallons (38 litres) a day," he says, loading up his wheelbarrow with containers. "But this water is only for showering and washing clothes. You shouldn't drink it, it can make you ill."

38 litres of water costs almost US\$0.13, and one container of drinking water costs US\$1, so poor people still drink the laundry

water, or other dirty water. The drinking water is mostly sold in bags and bottles. That water comes from wells that companies have bought the rights to use. They purify the water, package it and sell it.

So Kimmie and YAI give families in Monrovia's poorest neighbourhoods a water filter, so that they can purify dirty water and make it safe to drink, for example, in West Point, which is Monrovia's poorest neighbourhood. When Kimmie

shows the residents of West Point how the cloudy water becomes clear and safe to drink, they cheer. Kimmie drinks a mug of it to show that the water is now clean. The onlookers want to taste it too.

"We want to make sure that more poor families get filters like this," promises Kimmie. "Children shouldn't have to get sick from dirty water. Clean water is a human right."

Liberia's President, Ellen Sirleaf, has now asked Kimmie to take responsibility for making sure that all the inhabitants of Monrovia – 800,000 people – get running water again. The broken water pipes are going to be restored. More than half of the city's inhabitants are children.



Water for washing and drinking.



The filter makes the dirty water drinkable.



A gulp of the filtered water ...



... tastes good, and it won't make you ill.

Drinking water in bags is expensive for poor people, who have no choice but to drink whatever water they can get hold of, even if it's bad quality. That's how Kimmie fell ill with cholera, and almost died.



## Girls learn a trade

"AFTER SCHOOL I walk for an hour to get here to the YAI girls' center. Here we can learn a trade. I've already learned to do hair extensions and nails, like at a real beauty salon. The course is free. That's lucky, because my family would never be able to afford to pay. When I've

finished the course I'm going to start a hair salon. If I earn enough money I'll continue my education. I want to be an engineer and help to rebuild Liberia. The first thing I'm going to do is fix and asphalt all the roads. They're in a terrible state. Then I'll make sure all the roads have



streetlights. The worst thing that happened to me was when I had to take care of my aunt's baby instead of going to school."

*Charity L Jargbo, 15*



## The land of freed slaves

**LIBERIA WAS FOUNDED** in 1847 by freed slaves from the USA. In 1840 there were 4 million slaves in the USA. But more and more people believed slavery was wrong. Some people thought the slaves should be freed and made US citizens. Others thought they should be returned to Africa. From 1820 on, around 15,000 freed slaves were transported by ship to the part of Africa which was then named Liberia. Liberia means 'freedom'. The capital city was named 'Monrovia' after James Monroe, who was President of the USA at the time.

The freed slaves brought with them the way of thinking that they themselves had experienced: that some people were better than others. They had been treated badly. In the new country they became the highest in society. Those who were already living in the region were treated badly by those who came from the USA. The new arrivals, the Americo-Liberians, put themselves in charge and became the country's upper class. They still are. The unfair division of power was one of the reasons for the civil war. The rebel leader Charles Taylor said that he would free the country from the Americo-Liberians. But instead he took power himself – and Charles Taylor himself is an Americo-Liberian.

Lots of things in Liberia are similar to the USA: the flag is almost the same as the US flag, but it only has one star in the upper left-hand corner instead of 52. Much of the constitution is the same, the currency is called the dollar, and the people speak English.



# “Kimmie’s words made me lay down my weapon”

**When he was 14, Francis was kidnapped and forced to be a child soldier. He learned to kill, and lived a terrible life. But when he heard Kimmie Weeks on the radio, he started to dream of an end to his time as a soldier.**

**E**arly one morning our village is attacked. We hear gunfire from all around us, and people run in all directions to get away. Grenades explode. Some hit houses, which go up in flames. Suddenly I realise I’ve lost my family, and run out onto the road with many others who are trying to flee.

“The rebels have set up a checkpoint, guarded by boy soldiers. Some of them look younger than me. They are wearing all manner of strange clothes. One wears a white dress, another a suit that is much too big. They have magic amulets round their necks, grenades and ammunition over their shoulders, scary tattoos on their arms and war paint on their faces. There are skulls hanging on poles. They fire shots into the air to scare us. ‘Line up! Boys on the right! Girls on the left!’

“Anyone who doesn’t obey them straight away is shot. Panic spreads. People scream and weep in despair when they see what is happening to the people around them.

‘You there,’ shouts one of the boy soldiers, pointing at me in the line of boys. ‘Take this case of ammunition. You’re going to carry it for me. Move it!’

“I didn’t know then that this was the beginning of a living nightmare.”

### Became inhuman

“I was forced to jog with the heavy ammunition case on my head. If I wasn’t fast enough, the rebels shot at the ground beside my feet. Eventually we arrived at the rebel camp.

“I had to learn how to handle an automatic rifle. At that point I stopped being a



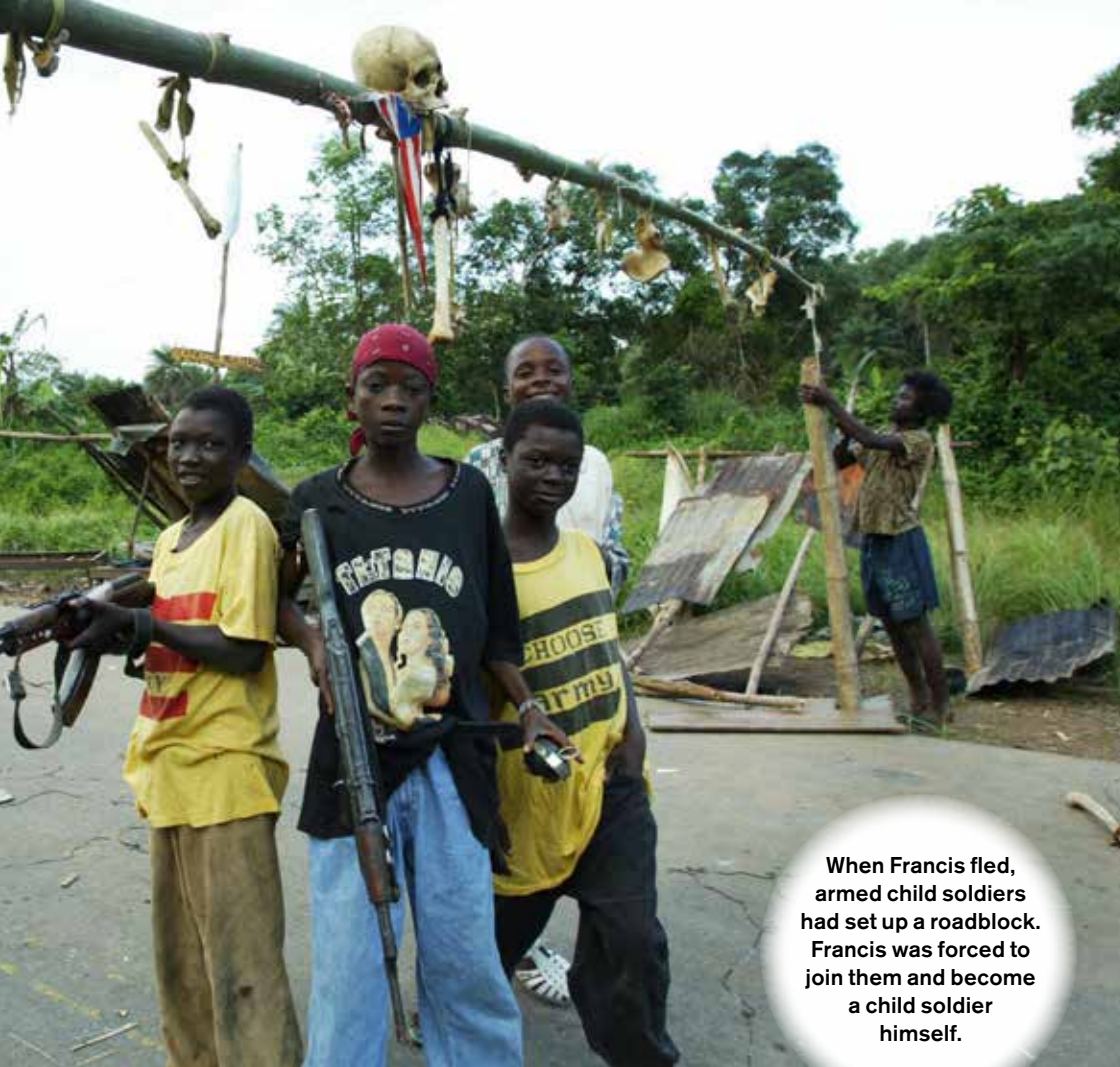
PATRICK ROBERT / CORBIS / SCANPIX

human being, even though I had grown up as a normal boy. I learned to kill, as an obedient soldier.

“We child soldiers were always sent out in the front line. They gave us drugs to make us brave. We didn’t know what we were doing. If we survived an attack, the leaders rewarded us by giving us a higher rank to make us



**When he heard Kimmie Weeks speaking on the radio, Francis began to dream of an end to his life as a soldier. Today he works for peace.**



When Francis fled, armed child soldiers had set up a roadblock. Francis was forced to join them and become a child soldier himself.

# Convicted of crimes against humanity

ON 26 APRIL 2012, former president of Liberia Charles Taylor was convicted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague, the Netherlands. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison for crimes against humanity during the war in Sierra Leone, Liberia's neighbouring country, because he 'planned some of the most brutal crimes in the history of humanity, including torture, rape and killing'. Charles Taylor also supplied the rebels in Sierra Leone with weapons. The rebels paid him in diamonds, which he smuggled to Belgium. People call them 'blood diamonds' because they were used to pay for weapons that killed 50,000 people and displaced 2.5 million more. The diamond smuggling made it possible for the war in Sierra Leone to continue for over ten years.

However, Charles Taylor has not been convicted for the crimes he caused in his homeland of Liberia. It was Charles Taylor who started the war in 1989. He promised it would be over in three days. But it went on for 14 years. 200,000 people were killed and half the population fled to neighbouring countries. Over 20,000 children were forced to become soldiers.

feel good. The troop became our family, and the commanding officers were our parents. We wanted to show that we could fight fearlessly, because then they praised us. Anyone who showed fear was punished immediately.

"We thought the rebel leader Charles Taylor was a hero, and we cheered when we saw him."

### The peace ambassador

"Things carried on like that for what seemed like an eternity. But one day, sitting in the camp with the other child soldiers, cleaning my weapon, I hear a young man talking about the war on the radio, in a completely different way to anything I've heard before. He says that we child soldiers have been tricked. That the rebels are exploiting us. He also says that it is against the law to use children as soldiers, and that

all child soldiers must be allowed to leave the fighting. It was the voice of Kimmie Weeks.

"I think about it and realise that what he is saying is true.

"I started to dream about an end to my life as a soldier. But I couldn't flee from the camp. If I tried they'd kill me instantly. The conflict was still going on in the part of the country where we were, although peace talks had begun in the capital and many child soldiers had been disarmed. I felt incredibly frustrated. I thought constantly about whether I was going to die now, when I'd only just realised that I should stop fighting.

"Finally, our rebel leader signs the peace agreement. That's when I meet Kimmie in person. He comes to one of the camps for child soldiers. He says something that I will never forget:

"You are young like me. We are the Liberia of tomorrow, and our country needs all its young people. Don't let weapons and rebel leaders destroy your lives. As soon as you use a weapon, you destroy your own life and the lives of others. Work for peace, not war!"

"I felt motivated to follow his example. After all, Kimmie was a young boy like me. He had been forced to flee Liberia because Charles Taylor wanted to kill him. And now he had chosen to come back, to help us. We called him the peace ambassador.

"Kimmie helped me and other child soldiers to create an organisation for the children and young people who had been soldiers and wanted to return to normal lives. I work for peace now. I will never use a weapon again." 🌍





# Abigail makes c

PATRICK ROBERTY / CORBIS SYGMA



A child soldier during the war in Liberia.

The terrible times begin when Abigail is seven, and her mother comes rushing in with her little brother on her back.

“Quick! Pack your clothes! We have to get out. Soldiers have started looting and killing people. They’ve blocked some of the roads,” she cries.

Today, Abigail is 17 years old and is a volunteer with Kimmie Weeks’ organisation, YAI. She teaches poor children to read.

**B**efore the war, life was good. Abigail attended her beloved school, where she had always longed to go.

But when Abigail has only been in school for one year, worrying news is reported on the radio. The rebels are

approaching the capital city of Monrovia, where Abigail lives. The war is creeping closer every day. Until one day they have to flee.

## Escape

They run through the streets, but around one corner they run straight into boys with large weapons. The boys shout and fire their guns to scare people. There are grown men on their knees with rifles aimed at their heads.

Abigail freezes in terror. She wonders how young boys can behave like this.

“What’s in your bag?” yells one of the boy soldiers at

Abigail, grabbing the bag.

“And you, woman! Got anything else?”

The boys search Abigail’s mother from head to toe. Finally they find the money she has hidden under her clothes, and laugh triumphantly.

“Ha! I knew it!” says one boy.

They walk for many hours with lots of other people. Nobody talks. The only sounds are footsteps on the road and children crying.

“Mum, I’m tired,” complains Abigail. “Can’t we rest?”

“No, hurry up, we must keep going,” says her mother, grabbing her hand.

A small pick-up truck appears on the road. Everyone shouts, “Stop! Give us a lift!” Although the back is already crammed with people, the driver stops. Abigail’s mother quickly grabs the side and pulls herself up. She manages to grab Abigail’s arm just as the truck begins to drive on.



# Children happy

“Where are we going?” asks Abigail.

“I think we can get to grandmother’s village this way,” replies her mother.

From the back of the truck, Abigail can see crowds of people fleeing. Some carry their belongings on their heads, others use wheelbarrows. She sees children weeping in despair, looking for their parents. She sees injured people at the roadside, and dead bodies out in the fields.

## Goodbye mother!

The next day they arrive at grandmother’s village.

“Oh joy!” exclaims grandmother when she sees them.

After a couple of weeks, Abigail’s mother says:

“My darling Abigail. Be a good girl now and help your grandmother with growing the vegetables. I’m going to take your brother and go back

to Monrovia. If things have calmed down I’ll come back for you.”

“Please mother, let me come with you!” pleads Abigail.

“No, it’s better for your here. But I have to take your brother with me, because he’s just a baby.”

Every day, Abigail walks to the road to watch for her mother returning. She waits to meet buses and cars coming from Monrovia. But her mother never comes.

“You have to work hard so that we have plenty of crops to sell when the war is over. Then we can go to Monrovia and you can start school,” promises Abigail’s grandmother. Abigail works in the fields, collects water, removes weeds and, finally, sows seeds.

After more than a year, Abigail’s grandmother says the words she has been waiting for:

“Now we have enough to harvest.”

Abigail is delighted. Maybe now she can find her mother and start school.

## Back to school

Much of Monrovia has been destroyed by the war. Many houses are shot to pieces or burned out. They move into a house with some relatives.



## Abigail, 17

**My best thing:** My TV and my soft bed!

**Loves:** Learning new things.

**Dreams of:** Building a hospital so that even poor people can get medical care.

**Doesn’t like:** When parents don’t let their children go to school.

**Worst thing that’s happened:** That my mother died and can’t see how well my life is going.

**Wants to be:** A nurse, because then you really help people.

But nobody knows where Abigail’s mother and younger brother are. Somebody says they saw her at the border with the Ivory Coast, and that she was on the way to Nigeria. That is all Abigail manages to find out.

They find a spot at the market where they can sell their vegetables. Every evening they count how much money they have made, and hide the

The children often come to Abigail for advice if they have problems, like if they are being beaten at home or bullied at school.





Some days Abigail goes to the playground after school to talk to the children and help those who have problems.

"I've just moved to town with my mother," says one girl. "My mother can't afford my school fees so that's why I have to sell bread every day. I hope to be able to start school next term."

"You'll see, it'll work out," says Abigail encouragingly. "Study hard once you start school. Then you'll go far."

money in a plastic bag under the mattress they share. One evening, Abigail and her grandmother are sitting on the bed as usual, counting their takings from the market. Abigail's grandmother says:

"Now my dear Abigail, we have enough money for you to start school."

Abigail hugs her grandmother, jumps down onto the floor and starts to dance around. She remembers what her mother used to say:

"Abigail, don't forget that

there are two paths to success. Some are born into success, while others have to fight for it."

#### Meeting Kimmie

One day when Abigail comes home from school and opens the door, her mother is sitting on the sofa! Her little brother is sitting beside her. She runs to them and hugs them for a long, long time.

"Mother! Where have you been? I've missed you so much!"

Her mother explains that

she had to flee across the border to escape the fighting. But Abigail can see that something is wrong. It's obvious that her mother is ill. One night, three months later, she dies. Abigail cries herself to sleep every night and stays home from school. But when she has calmed down she tells herself:

"Crying isn't going to bring her back. I'm going to show the world that Mama Winnie's daughter can make it, even though she isn't here!"

Some time later, Abigail is invited to the end of term ceremony at her friend's school. There is a special guest speaker. It's Kimmie Weeks. When Kimmie talks about his experiences of the war, Abigail can identify with what he says.

"Look at that, such a person who has been through the same difficulties as I have. That means that I can be successful too."

"Don't let hardship stop you in your life. Take your studies seriously and become what you want to be," she hears Kimmie say.

#### Wants to help children

When she gets to school the next day, Abigail says:

"Do you know what?! I heard Kimmie Weeks yesterday!" Her classmates want to hear everything he said.

When Abigail is called into the principal's office, she wonders what she has done wrong:

"Maybe I didn't go out at break time... or... maybe someone has died?" But that's not what the principal wants to say.

"Come in. Take a seat and I'll tell you what this is about. Kimmie Weeks and YAI have offered to pay your school fees, since you are one of the best students in the school and you work so hard."

"My dreams are coming true! If only my mother could see me now!" thinks Abigail.



Abigail loves her soft toys, and all the children who visit her do too.

Sometimes ten neighbouring children gather in Abigail's soft bed to watch a film on TV.



Dressed up with lovely nails.





**“Abigail is always fair. She is friendly to people in the area. She takes care of children, plays with them and teaches them things. More people should be like her,” says Abigail’s housemate Mayamu.**

a week in one of the poorest parts of Monrovia. She knows from experience how big a difference it makes when someone is there for you when you are young. When someone looks after you and cares about you.

“I know I can make children feel happy. We sing and play a lot. At ordinary school, you do the same old stuff every day. I want to create a big school that everyone enjoys attending. Laughter helps you to learn.”

Abigail has also become a leader in her area. Many children come to her with their problems. Some come in tears after being beaten. Abigail listens, comforts and offers advice. Sometimes there are ten other children sleeping in her bed.

“I’m proud of being part of Kimmie’s organisation. It’s much better when young people help each other. We take each other seriously.”

There is something else Abigail wants Kimmie’s help with. She finds out where his office is and asks to meet him.

“How can I help you?” asks Kimmie.

“I am so grateful for the grant you have given me. Now I want to help children who face the same struggles I have faced. Just like you. What can I do? I have time after school every day.”

### Teaching poor children

Kimmie suggests that Abigail should do the YAI course and learn to teach children who can’t afford to go to school. That suits Abigail perfectly. She loves being with children and teaching them things. Now she is a YAI volunteer, teaching children several days



**“Oh how I longed to start school. It was so terrible when the war broke out and I had to stop again. Education is so important. That’s why I volunteer at YAI’s extra school, helping children who are not able to attend ordinary school,” explains Abigail.**



**Wearing school uniform.**



**Abigail’s favourite shoes to wear at home.**

**During the war, Abigail helped her grandmother grow vegetables. When they sold them at the market, they got enough money for Abigail to be able to start school.**





# Selling things to go to school

IN LIBERIA, only half of all children go to school. The war made many families poor, with no means to pay school fees. The war also made many children orphans. That's why children have to sell things, to earn money for their school fees. Those who live around the YAI playground take the chance to rest under the big tree, and to play and talk with their friends. Abigail usually goes there to give the children advice.

## Buy socks!

"Every day after school I sell socks to make money for my school fees. I'm glad we have this playground here, otherwise I wouldn't have anywhere to go when I need a break."  
*Enoch, 15, Sock seller*



## Playing in peace

"CHILDREN HAVE the right to play! All children need to play! But play is not a given for many children here in Liberia. The country is at peace now, but many children still cannot play as there are so few places where they can play freely. That's why we fought hard to keep the playground here in Paynsville. The authorities planned to take it down and build houses there instead. We raised money to restore the playground. It was badly damaged after the war – there were bullet holes in the slide and the swing frames had all been knocked down. Now children come here to play again. Our volunteers come here to talk to children and give them the motivation to go to school. And the children who have to work selling things to help their families can come here for a while too."  
*Kimmie Weeks*

## Buy biscuits!

*Patience, 13  
 Biscuit seller*



## Buy a broom!

*Paul, 15  
 Broom seller*

## Buy a toilet brush!

*Rufus, 15  
 Toilet brush seller*



## Buy bread!

*Rebecca, 13  
 Bread seller*



## Buy soap!

"My father thinks it's good that I work and earn money for my school fees. At the moment I'm selling soap. I would rather paint adverts outside shops. I'm really good at drawing."  
*Prince, 15  
 Soap seller*



## Buy water!

*Asarah, 10  
 Water seller*



## No play in wartime

"IN WARTIME, when you're hungry, you can't laugh," says Lass. "In wartime you can't play football, or visit friends, or do anything that's fun. During the war we lay on the floor, terrified of being killed. We need peace to be able to play."

## Theatre against trafficking

"MANY PEOPLE ARE AFRAID to come to West Point. A lot of former rebel soldiers live here, and people are poor. There are many children here who have been kidnapped from villages in the country and brought here to work for someone, begging or selling different things. They don't go to school and are treated like slaves. Poor girls are exploited by older men. Sometimes the man offers to pay the girl's

school fees, but only if he can exploit her. We do street theatre to help people understand that it's wrong to treat children like that. YAI supports us because they believe it's important for people to know what's happening to children. People like our plays and discussions often arise afterwards."  
*Philomena, 15*





### Wants to learn

"I love coming here. Before I had nothing to do all day, because my parents can't afford to pay school fees. But I want to learn too, just like the children who go to school. And I am learning now! They tell us stories here, and teach us songs and rhymes. The worst thing I know is not being able to learn things. I want to become a journalist and write about what happens in other countries so that we in Liberia can find out more about the world."

Tom, 15



## Want to be the Just Lawyer

IT'S THE END of term at Zoe-Louise Preparatory School in Monrovia and Anthionette, 12, is introducing today's speaker: "Kimmie Weeks is a role model for us, because he works hard to make life better for children in Liberia." Kimmie's organisation, Youth Action International, has trained the teachers at Anthionette's school and provided more fun school resources.



Anthionette, with her role model Kimmie.

It doesn't matter how old you are or what your background is," says Kimmie. "I grew up with no father, I was hungry and I had to beg for money to pay my school fees. Keep fighting! Don't give up! Make Liberia a better place to live!"

"I want to be a just lawyer," says Anthionette. "Because here in Liberia, many lawyers are unjust. Anyone who has money can make sure guilty people get away with crimes. That's not good. I want Liberia to remember me as the Just Lawyer."

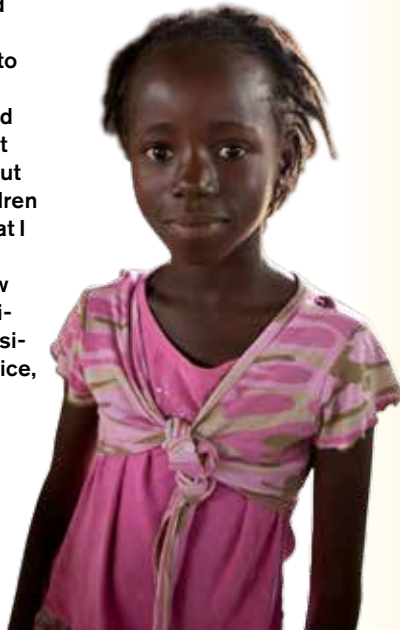
## Students at YAI's extra school

YAI HAS founded extra schools in poor areas for the children who can't afford to go to an ordinary school. Abigail comes to the extra school in New Kru Town after ordinary school several times a week to help teach the children.

### Wants to be president!

"I'm so happy to have started school here. It's like a real school, but more fun. I used to have to work every day and wash clothes, fetch water and go to the market for food. But one day my aunt told me about the extra school, where children can learn things, and said that I could go! Now I can write my name and I have loads of new friends. I want to be the president of Liberia. When I'm president I will lower the price of rice, because poor people can't afford to buy it."

Rina, 9



## YAI makes school fun

"UNFORTUNATELY, many schools in Liberia are boring," says Helena Carter, who runs the school program at YAI. "Often the teaching just consists of a teacher writing on a chalkboard while the children copy into their jotters. If any student makes a mistake or talks in class, the teacher is quick to punish them with the cane. We want to change that. It has to be fun for children to learn. That makes it easy to learn."

"That's why everyone loves the YAI school program. We do games, songs, rhymes and dances. We train the teachers not to beat the children. They think it's impossible to get children to obey them without hitting them. But that's totally wrong. 'Talk to the children,' we say. YAI has trained 400 teachers. The schools that are part of the program have become very popular and lots of children want to attend them."



# “Stop beating children!”

When Nene arrives at the children’s home, all the other children are standing in front of the building to greet her. She is shy and doesn’t want to let go of her grandmother’s hand. Then one of the children walks up to her and says:

“I’m Kulha. If you want we can be best friends, you and me.”

Nene’s move to the YAI children’s home couldn’t have had a better start. Now, several years later, Nene has grown confident and performs street theatre for the rights of the child.



Nene grew up with her grandmother because her mother died in the war when she was a baby. Nene’s grandmother couldn’t afford to let her go to school. Nene often hid just inside her front door, peeking out at all the other children rushing past on their way to school. She didn’t want them to see her, because then they would shout mean things at her:

“Look, there’s the girl who doesn’t have a mother! She doesn’t even go to school!”

Nene would go running to her grandmother and sit on her knee, crying.

“There, there Nene, don’t cry. Be brave!” her grandmother would say. “That’s the only way to move on in life.”

It was painful to feel excluded from something that seemed so much fun. She was so curious, but being bullied had made her shy.

One day, a stranger called at grandmother’s house.

“I’ve heard that your grandchild doesn’t go to school,” said the woman. “If you want, she could start going to a school near the children’s home that I am the director of. It’s free.”

The journey to the children’s home was the longest and happiest journey of Nene’s life. When they arrived, all the children were waiting for them. That was when she met Kulha. They did indeed become best friends, and since then they have done everything together.

“Kulha is like my sister,” says Nene. “The other children are like my siblings as well.”

## Child Rights Club

Nene hardly dared to speak to anyone when she arrived at the children’s home, except Kulha of course. But one day a man came to visit. He wondered if any students wanted to start a Child Rights Club at school. Nene thought: “I’d love to do that, but I’m not brave enough...”

Afterwards, some of Nene’s classmates came running.

“Nene, will you help us to start a Child Rights Club?” said one girl.

“No, I can’t, I don’t have time,” replied Nene, avoiding the issue.

“Please, we need you to be secretary. You have such good writing, and you’re doing well at school and you’re always kind to others. Go on!”

Nene felt flattered. She hadn’t realised that they thought she was so good at things. Finally she said:

“OK, I’ll join in. I’ll have a go at being secretary.”

There were over 50 students at the first meeting. Nene was so nervous that her hand shook as she tried to write down what everyone said. Before falling asleep that night, she prayed:

“Dear God! Help me to be confident enough to speak at the next meeting.”

At the next Child Rights Club meeting Nene shared together.

“I’m proud of getting this far. I’m only 16 and already I know loads of things. I hope others can feel the same way,” says Nene.



her ideas and helped to plan lots of activities. She wrote the minutes with a steady hand. She had become brave and confident!

### Giving advice

The Child Rights Club has changed Nene's life. Students and teachers alike come to her for advice. When the principal is away, he usually asks Nene to read out messages to teachers or parents. She visits parents who won't let their children go to school and makes them change their minds. At one Child Rights Club meeting, the group discussed the fact that many parents beat their children. Some children have scars on their bodies, others come to school with bruises, and others have to stay home because they have been beaten so badly.

"It's just not right. People should not beat children," says Nene. "What can we do to make them understand?"

"Maybe we could write sketches and perform them where there are lots of people," someone suggests. Everyone thinks that's a great idea.

A few weeks later, everyone has their part to play and the whole group heads for the town square. They knock on

**Kulha and Nene are doing work experience at a car and motorcycle workshop. They're learning to drive motorbikes and cars, and to fix engines.**

"My favourite thing is taking the engine apart and putting it back together," says Nene. "It's a bit like learning how the human body works, with all the different parts that make the whole thing work."

doors and encourage people to come out and watch. They have asked the Town Crier to tell everyone what's about to happen. He walks around calling:

"Don't go to the fields today! Gather in the square! Gather in the square! There are people who want to talk to you about the rights of the child! Gather in the square!"

Lots of people come, probably several hundred.

### Don't beat children

Nene yells and beats 'her child' with a cane. In another sketch, a father uses the money meant for his children's school fees to buy beer. The audience laugh and comment on what's happening in the plays. Someone shouts in agreement. Someone else gets angry and says:



**Nene in her photo album, which is one of her most treasured possessions.**

"Of course we have to beat our children, otherwise what will they turn into?"

After the performance, they talk about the rights of the child.

"You have to stop beating children – it isn't good for them. Talk to them instead," says Nene. Nene walks up to one of the noisiest women and says:

"If you talk to your children in a normal way, not in a nasty or angry voice, they will listen to you. I promise!"

Nene stands close to the woman she is talking to. She has noticed that people listen better if you do that. The woman stares at Nene in surprise.

"Well... I see... maybe I'll give that a try," she replies.

That evening as they fall asleep, Nene says to Kulha:

"Do you know what? I had an idea today. You know we both dreamt of becoming doctors and starting a hospital where poor people can get help? But now I could imagine becoming an actress and making films that encourage

children and help people understand that children have rights."

"Maybe we can do both!" says Kulha. 🌍



### Nene, 16

**Loves:** Sport.

**Hates:** Fighting.

**Favourite foods:** Rice and bread.

**Best thing:** Getting to move to Kimmie's children's home and start school.

**Worst thing:** The war, when people killed each other.

**Role model:** Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, President of Liberia.

**Wants to be:** A doctor or an actress.

**Nene and Kulha run hand in hand. They have been together almost all the time since the day Nene arrived at the children's home.**





# One day at the home for orphans

THERE ARE 66 CHILDREN living at Kimmie's YAI children's home. Most lost their parents in the civil war. Everyone who lives there helps with cooking, cleaning, clearing land and tending their crops when they're not at school. The children's home is almost self-sufficient. The building used to be so badly damaged that the rain came in. But thanks to YAI, a new, bigger home has now been built.



**4.30 a.m. Wake-up call**  
"Rise and shine!" shouts Mama Kumba. "Time to wake up!"

**5.00 a.m. Morning shower**  
The children's home has its own well where the children fetch water for everything. The bucket is heavy when it's full, but better than have to make two trips.



**6.00 a.m. Morning prayers**  
Everyone joins in with the traditional prayer songs.



**8.00 a.m. Preschool**  
When the older children have gone to school, the younger ones have classes at the children's home.



**7.00 a.m. Time for school**  
All children over twelve go to school along the main road towards Freetown. If it's raining, the children wait until the rain stops before they walk to school.



**6.30 a.m. Breakfast**  
Every morning, rice and grated meat is served for breakfast. It's a good mixture for growing children.



**2.00 p.m. Lunch**  
It's fufou for lunch (porridge made with cassava) served with boiled leaves, similar to spinach.





### 3.00 p.m. Playtime!

Once everyone has come home from school, eaten and rested, there is time for games and sports. The younger children are drawing 'The King's Daughter' on the ground.

### 4.00 p.m. Crops

Most of the food that is eaten at the children's home is grown there. All the children help to sow seeds, remove weeds and harvest the crops.



### 6.00 p.m.

#### Evening prayers

"Dear God, help me to live my life in a good way, and take care of my mother and father in heaven," pray the children during evening prayers.



### 7.00 p.m. Homework time

It's dark by seven o'clock. So that the children can do their homework, Mama Kumba switches on the big battery-powered reading lights.

### 8.00 p.m. Good night prayers and chit chat

Before going to sleep, Nene and Kulha take the chance to listen to the radio and chat about the day's events. Then they pray for protection during their night's sleep.



### 9.00 p.m. Lights out!

Mama Kumba locks the door and makes sure everyone is quiet.



Kimmie talks with the team.



## Football unites

PRINCE FC are playing Plumcut Young Professionals and YAI have given both clubs balls, football strips and shoes. They also train the team captains, Prince and Lass. The final score is 2-2 and the players gather to listen to Kimmie Weeks:

“If more people learn to cooperate like you guys, this country will go a long way. Football builds peace. We’re going to make sure there is a football team in every neighbourhood, and train more team captains to be role models like Prince and Lass. Many children in this area have suffered because of the war, and have lost parents. They don’t go to school, instead they wander the streets, ending up in criminal gangs or on drugs. We are going to give them back their hope.”

# Prince won't give up

“I HAD THIS IDEA that we could start playing football seriously here in our neighbourhood. Even though I knew we were broke, I asked my mother if I could buy a leather football. I went down on my knees and said:

‘Please mum, can I buy a football?’

‘No Prince, you know we can’t afford it,’ she replied crossly.

But I didn’t give up. I went to my aunt and uncle, who are older than my mother, and asked them to persuade her. They thought it sounded like a good idea, and they came home with me.

‘Prince has been selling water for years. Surely you can let him buy a football?’ said my aunt.

My mother was annoyed but she looked at me and said: ‘OK then, start saving and buy the football.’

I sold water like never before. I rushed home from school, fetched the coolbox full of water and went out onto the streets. It took several weeks to save up enough. Then I took the bus into town. I rushed to the sports shop, put my money on the counter and got the beautiful leather ball. I felt like I was walking on air all the way home. My team mates went crazy when they saw me coming home with the football.

To be a good team you have



to stick together. You can’t be good without taking training seriously, just like school.”

### We stick together

“A while ago my mother said:

‘I’m sorry I was so negative when you wanted to buy the football. I can see that it has been good for you and for many others. People respect you. And I do too.’

Now we stick together in our area. I’m the team captain of Prince FC and I always say:

‘Stick together and don’t fight. Respect all the others in the area, even the other teams.’

Now that we have received support from YAI I feel like a part of something bigger. We young people need role models. There are not many people who have time for us

young people, but Kimmie and his staff do. Both Lass and I are YAI volunteers and mentors for our teams. I want to be a good youth leader and I think I’ve made a good start. Parents come to me and thank me, because their children have changed since they started playing with us. That feels good.”

*Prince, 15, Favourite footballer: Ronaldo, Portugal*

### What makes a good leader?

The team think Prince is a good leader because he: **is generous, helps others, is respectful, gives good advice, understands their situation, is patient.**

TEXT: GUNILLA HAMNE PHOTOS: SENAY BERHE



# Fredrick's good heart



Fredrick always stands up for friends and people who are worse off.

**"MY HEART BEATS** a bit faster when I think about football. It has given me lots of new friends. That's why there are fewer fights in our neighbourhood, now that we have football to focus on. I'm planning to be Liberia's latest football star.

My heart doesn't only beat for football, but for other people too. Others say I have a good heart and that's something I'm proud of. When someone in our neighbourhood is hungry I share the food we have at home with them. If I get Christmas presents I always give some of them away to people who

didn't get anything. Every day I round up the children in my neighbourhood who don't go to school and teach them. Then they don't feel so excluded. I usually go to their homes and encourage their parents, saying 'Let your child go to school. Try to save up for the school fees.'

I lent my football boots to a friend, and when he returned them one sole was falling off. That's why I don't have proper shoes today, just plastic sandals. But I borrow shoes from someone else when I'm playing a match. These things always work out."

*Fredrick, 14*



Fredrick warms up in flip-flops, but during the match he borrows shoes from whoever he replaces on the pitch.



# Shy Lass becomes a leader

**"I'M THE TEAM CAPTAIN** of a football team called Plumcut Young Professionals. I'm incredibly proud of our team. Next year we'll be joining division three, if we can raise enough money for the fee. That's why we do cleaning work in the neighbourhood every Saturday.

For me, being a leader is something new. Before I was always on my own. One day my mother said:

'Lass, you can't just go around on your own your

whole life. Think of something you can do for others.'

At first I didn't really understand what she meant. But one Saturday afternoon when I was standing watching some boys kick a ball, it came to me: I'm going to start a team! A few people in my neighbourhood heard about my plans. I heard on the grapevine what they were saying:

'How will Lass manage to get a football team together? He can't even talk to people.'

Their comments just made me even more motivated. I started to talk to the people I had seen playing football and asked them if they wanted to join in.

I feel like a new person now, and young people come to me for advice. Maybe it was the war that made me shy. My mother and I slept under tables at market stalls, or in abandoned shacks. I saw horrific things and I was terrified.

It still makes me sad to

think about how people treated one another. That's why what I do seems important - helping people to unite instead of fighting and killing one another. Football is a good way to get young people to do something together. Now that we have equipment and support from YAI, it's going to be even better."

*Isaac Lass, 16*

*Favourite footballer: Lukas Podolski, Germany*

Lass doing his team talk.

