

## Bite of the Mango Sweetens Success for One Sierra Leone Woman

Written by Helena Kaufman

Tuesday, 02 December 2008 19:46 -

---

### The Afro News Vancouver BC

A diminutive young woman from Sierra Leone, Mariatu Kamara seems too small to carry the weight of her experience and the story that results from it. Unlike many of the child victims of war, the horrors Kamara saw, the assaults on her spirit and the brutality she experienced from age 12, are now being read and discussed by young people the world over. Her book, *The Bite of the Mango*, was begun before she even spoke English and not long after her arrival in Canada, still in her teens. With the support and story telling skill of journalist Susan McClelland, the engaging book offers well crafted characters and plot. The twist of course, is that Mariatu Kamara is very real – as are all the details of her story. On a recent stop on a North America wide tour to promote the book, she and Susan brought the reality to her generation. The duo, now more than writer and source, and more like family than friends, spoke to three schools in the Lower Mainland. Kamara contrasts life before the war, “Things were nice before, we lived in the village. We respected and helped each other. She muses on the difference between the earthy calm of her early years and the culture she now lives in. “All we value is life. The ability to live each day. Here people take little things very seriously and it causes them anxiety. At home we learned to respect everyone and take them for who they are.”

### Questions and Kids

In Vancouver, as in other cities across Canada, Mariatu visited several schools and shared her story. Through her she hopes the divide of knowledge will be bridged. As she brings her roots and the solidity of tradition and sweet memories of village life before the war in Sierra Leone, she hopes it will raise awareness. Considering the harsh details and loss in her young life, she delivers a very positive message. In part it is her personal make up and in part the foundation she stands on. “The kids ask random questions. Questions about me and how I feel about what happened in my country, and to me,” she says. While kids are more in tune with global messages and have so much more access to information because of the net they still don’t hear the full story. Kamara sees they still mostly only hear stories of war, negatives, reports of conflicts and their tribal basis. “There is no mention of modernity, progress, education, culture and the beauty and strength of daily life in Sierra Leone.” On her tour and in her book, Kamara’s mission includes bringing another face of Africa to youth and adults in western communities. The technology enabled members of her audience, she hopes will be encouraged to take a greater interest via internet, TV, and local projects to search out more news than surface stereotypes and event reporting. With sharing her life experience in her book she hopes others will look for the larger story.

### Origins and Opportunity

“What makes Mariatu different is opportunity. She can reach so many young people. And, she has the strength she is able to draw on by knowing where she comes from,” says McClelland. Kids identify with her. Her audiences and many of her readers, see that she talks, dresses, studies and takes an interest in music – just like them. She is into all the regular stuff of youth. “Part of what I want to do is show the world how much we have in common – all people.” “Opportunity”, says Susan McClelland is what separates Mariatu from the kids in the audience. “Through her book, *Bite of the Mango*, she can tell her personal story and also represent the experience of girls and women in the ordeal of the war. She has the opportunity to show that some challenges are not about colour or tribes. Her story of courage, hope and reconciliation is also recognized by other youthful victims of war. Ishmael Beah, author of *Long Way Gone* promoted her existence and the importance of the book she was as yet just working on with Susan McClelland when she met him. Kamara’s story, however, is not about betrayal like the boy soldiers experienced. While their families were fragmented and villages left in conflict, her family stayed together and was only strengthened. “All the people I come in contact with who help me grow and move forward are part of my now international family, but it is really important to know where I came from, who my family is and all the extended family that is my village” says Kamara.

Opportunity also distinguishes Kamara from the people and the place she came from. “I am participating in education and experiences I would not have been available to have at home.” Now 22, she is in her first year of a two year course in the Assaulted Women and Children’s Counsellor/Advocate Program at George Brown College in Toronto.

She has also been named a UNICEF Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. In addition to her studies and the book, Kamara has established a foundation. And, while she now lives in Canada she plans on using her more elevated profile to help support constructive programs to connect her two worlds through her foundation. With some early wisdom and perhaps the still uncompromising views of youth – her prescription for survival is to forgive and go on. Kamara urges youth to have goals. “Hold on to what you are doing – have a goal and for sure put a priority on education. Don’t forget who you are and where you came from.”

The co-authors hope that Kamara’s story as recorded for all to share in by Susan McClelland can help people to learn how to be engaged in their world. As human nature in this rushed culture we live in dictates, people don’t pay attention to issues until they impact them. Kamara’s story shines a light on the similarities that challenge the entire world. Sierra Leone, and much of Africa is no longer as dark as it was for most of us decades ago nor as overshadowed by news

## **Bite of the Mango Sweetens Success for One Sierra Leone Woman**

Written by Helena Kaufman

Tuesday, 02 December 2008 19:46 -

---

reports. Her first person account of the will to overcome and thrive inspires.

Helena is a business writing and communications specialist. She is a seasoned consultant now based in Vancouver, but proud of her solid prairie roots.

[www.theafronews.ca](http://www.theafronews.ca)