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Mediators on a Mission

By Anne Parys

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Louis Kushner has done an extensive amount of traveling. From China to Poland to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, Kushner has seen and experienced many cultures, but even he was a little surprised when Robert Creo approached him about a trip to Ghana and Liberia.

Creo and Kushner are both attorneys and mediators. Creo runs a private mediation practice based in Pittsburgh. He has taught mediation at Chatham University, Duquesne University School of Law, and the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. Kushner is a labor and employment attorney and a seasoned mediator with the Pittsburgh-based firm Rothman Gordon. He is a course planner, panelist, speaker and lecturer to various groups on the subject of mediation. He has also served as senior editor for a book on alternative dispute resolution in employment law to be published by BNA.

While alternate dispute resolution has been making great strides as a tool for attorneys in Pennsylvania, Creo saw the potential for more than reducing the caseloads of the courts. Inspired by an article by California-based mediator Kenneth Cloke, Creo began to formulate an idea for a mediation group that would address humanitarian issues. Kushner joined him to become one of the 150 founding members from across the globe of Mediators Beyond Borders (MBB). Loosely modeled on organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, MBB includes arbitrators, mediators and professional counselors who apply their skills to bring hope and resolution to some of the most hopeless situations in the world.

Creo was familiar with research being conducted at the University of Pittsburgh concerning Africa's former Liberian child soldiers and decided that getting involved in Liberia would be a worthy mission for MBB. It would certainly take the members out of their comfort zone. Liberians suffered many years of turmoil where power was the only means to obtain objectives; introducing negotiation and mediation to Liberia's vulnerable populations and nascent civil society organizations could promote alternative paths to nonviolent resolution of conflict.

Creo made a trip to the Buduburam refugee camp near Accra in

Ghana last November. For his return visit in May, he was invited to lecture at the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation at the University of Liberia. Kushner decided to set aside any apprehension he felt about traveling to a country ravaged by nearly 15 years of civil wars and agreed to join Creo.

They set off for Ghana on May 15 and were greeted there by Larry Larty, a lawyer and former commander of Ghanaian peacekeeping troops under the jurisdiction of the United Nations.

Larty took Creo and Kushner to the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CENCOR), where they did coaching and participated in panel discussions for Ghanaian lawyers, civil servants, and other professionals.

The following day they visited the Buduburam refugee camp, which houses more than 40,000 Liberian refugees, including nearly 400 former child soldiers. MBB, in conjunction with the Child Soldier Reintegration Fund (www.childsoldiersfund.org), has chosen approximately 85 former child soldiers to be educated and reintegrated into Liberian society. Many ex-combatants, especially those children who became unwilling soldiers, know how to address conflict only with force and violence. MBB mediators have demonstrated alternative ways to resolve disputes via dialogue and mediation. The young men receive tuition to attend a school run by the Society Methodist Africa (SMA) to learn such trades as carpentry, plumbing, electrical work, and masonry.

Creo and Kushner then left the relative safety of Ghana and flew to Liberia to meet with three organizations they hoped would partner with MBB: The Lutheran Church of Liberia Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program; the Action Harvest Organization; and the National Ex-Combatant's Peace Initiative. "Really, the trip [was] more than teaching mediation skills. We're also using our

mediation skills to bring partners on board and have them agree to collaborate with us to repatriate these former child soldiers," says Creo. All three of the organizations know a lot about repatriation, working with the receiving communities and returning former child soldiers to society, and they agreed to work together to move the Liberian Initiative forward.

Following the partnering meeting, Creo and Kushner went on to the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation, where their lecture was well received. Although the university buildings are in poor repair (like much of the city's infrastructure), Creo and Kushner report that the class was engaged and animated.

The post-graduate level course lasted three hours and the students were especially interested in how mediation could influence post-war issues and initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established by Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to address crimes committed during the later stages of Liberia's long era of civil war.

Another accomplishment of the trip was a meeting with Jim Belcher, who had owned a rubber plantation in Liberia prior to the civil wars. Belcher is hoping to acquire a new plantation and employ 6,000 farmers - no small feat in a country with 85 percent unemployment. Jim arranged an ad hoc tour of a rubber plantation owned by a Liberian, Keith Juboh, who had coincidentally studied chemical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh. By the end of the tour, Juboh had agreed to take 10 MBB former child soldiers to work for him. This was welcome news, especially as Creo and Kushner learned upon their return to Ghana that the Buduburam refugee camp will be closed by Oct. 31 and the refugees repatriated to Liberia.



Louis Kushner with some of the former child soldier students, who show off their masonry skills.

Back in Ghana, Creo and Kushner spent the last day of their trip updating the 85 students on their progress. The students were well aware of their good fortune. They frequently broke into applause during the update, afterward insisting on showing Kushner a cinderblock wall they had recently built to practice their skills. They asked to see pictures from Juboh's plantation to make sure their masonry skills were up to par. Kushner assured them that the quality of their work was comparable to that being done at the plantation and their relief was evident from the smiles on their faces. The tuition program that enables these young men to attend school gives them more than a way to make a living; it also gives them a reason for living. As one student told Kushner and Creo, "I was on the streets and I had nothing. You saved my life."

Back in the comfort and safety of the United States, Creo and Kushner have much work to do. Most important is to educate the public that while the media focus in Africa may now have shifted to Dufar and Zimbabwe, Liberia desperately needs help to rebound. Certainly, MBB has proven that mediation is a powerful tool. Although the trip was alternately frightening, frustrating and emotionally overwhelming, it was also a life-changing event.

Reflecting back, Kushner mused, "Sitting less than 10 feet from me in all directions were 85 young men, now in their early 20s, who had killed, maimed and tortured thousands of people [and] who now had some hope of re-integrating into a normal life."

MBB wants to ensure they get that chance at a normal life. The October deadline set by the Secretary General of Ghana to repatriate the Liberian refugees increases the pressure to finalize the education and placement of the 85 former child soldiers. If you would like more information about Mediators Beyond Borders and their Liberian Initiative, visit the MBB Web site, www.mediatorswithoutborders.org. You may also visit our website (www.rothmangordon.com) to download "Giving a Chance at Life" which reports on The Liberian Initiative.

Scenes from the Pittsburgh 100 Awards

Rothman Gordon was proud to sponsor the *Pittsburgh Business Times'* Pittsburgh 100 Awards on August 21, 2008 at the Duquense Club.

According to *Business Times* Publisher Alan Robertson, "This year, more than half of the companies on the list are either new to the Pittsburgh 100, or haven't been on the list in several years." He went on to say, "If you wanted to make the list this year, you would have needed more than 45% growth between 2005 and 2007."

We think that is great news for Pittsburgh and look forward to sponsoring again next year.



Managing Shareholder Bill Lestitian (center) is joined by Jeff Lininger (left) and Jason Wolfe (right) of Omni Prepaid Group.



Rothman Gordon's Alan Blanco & Patrick Regan with Troy Geanopulous of CLT Efficient Technologies Group (left to right).

In the News...

Bernie Puozuole finalist for PAACC Jenny Award



Bernie Puozuole was a finalist for the Pittsburgh Airport Area Chamber of Commerce's Jenny Award. Named for the World War I biplane that earned a reputation for rugged reliability, the Jenny Award is presented as a token of the Chamber's gratitude to members who have displayed above and beyond service to the Chamber.



Team Rothman Gordon has fun raising money for charity

Rothman Gordon sponsored a team for the 4th annual Wheel

Chair Grand Prix benefiting Variety, the Children's Charity. Team members Kathy Bowen, Judy Houy, Jaymie McElroy, Anne Parys and Shelly Rotondo ran the relay 1/2 mile course twelve times while pushing a wheel chair to raise awareness for Variety's programs.

Bill Lestitian appointed Trustee for Achieva



Managing Shareholder Bill Lestitian has been appointed to the Board of Trustees of Achieva, the largest non-profit organization in Western Pennsylvania serving adults and children with disabilities and their families. Bill also serves on the finance committee and as the chair of the audit committee.

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