

Remarks by Mariatu Kamara
Voices of Courage Awards
May 7, 2009

Hello. My name is Mariatu Kamara and I am very honored to be here with you today.

I arrived in Canada six years ago as a refugee from Sierra Leone. When I was growing up I had never even heard of Canada! I never imagined that I would ever leave my village. The fact that I find myself here today is like a dream, but it took a tragedy for it to become real.

I was raised by my Aunt Marie and her family in another village, Magborou. Magborou is a very small village of about 200 people with eight main houses made of clay.

As a child, I spent my days under the 140 degree sun on my family's farm helping to grow and harvest rice, vegetables and fruit. We also had to collect water for our families from the river. Even so, we managed to have fun. My favorite days were when we went fishing. The only time I had to play with my friends was late in the evenings, when work was finished, and the moon was bright. I was happy. I had family and friends.

Then the war came into my life. My three cousins and I were captured by the rebel soldiers. Most of them were young boys. I watched as they tortured and killed. They burned down our entire village.

The rebels let my cousins and me live. But they cut off our hands so that we could tell others about the destruction they were capable of.

I passed out and when I regained consciousness, I found myself alone. I wandered into the bush where I spent the night. The next day, I went looking for help. I didn't think I would make it, but my will was too strong to give up.

The first person I met was a man who offered me a mango. He wanted to hold it for me, but I refused. Even though my arms were bleeding, I was determined to hold the mango myself. That, to me, was a sign that my will to live was stronger than anything else. And that's why I called my book "The Bite of the Mango." I also realized that you can't control life, and you never know what the future has in store for you. I knew that I wanted to live to see what was waiting for me in life.

I finally wandered into a village and I was taken to a hospital in the capital city, Freetown. After my treatment, I moved into an amputee camp in a suburb of Freetown, where I lived for three years. There, I was reunited with my cousins. Because there was no other way of getting money for food, we had to turn to begging in the streets to survive.

I joined a Theatre Troupe made up of other amputees of the war. I really enjoyed the singing, dancing and acting. We performed stories about HIV and AIDS in order to spread the word about the disease. We also performed stories about the war and how we wanted to forgive but never forget what had happened to us. We wanted to let the rebels know that we had survived the

pain and suffering that they had caused us. The Theatre Troupe was a lot of fun for me and it helped me to heal and to look forward to the future with hope.

I was sponsored to go to Canada in 2002. I was only 15 years old. I went overnight from a life of begging in the streets, to one where I was comfortable and safe. Even so, at the beginning, I was very sad and lonely because I had to leave all my family behind. There were times I felt like killing myself because of what I have witnessed and the thought of going through life without my hands. But my family and friends remind me that I still have a lot of life to live and that I should ask God to give me courage to face my future.

Today I live with a wonderful family who came to Canada from Sierra Leone many years ago. They welcomed me into their family as one of their daughters, and I now think of them as my parents.

When I arrived in Canada, I spoke no English and couldn't read or write. Now I am a college student. I am learning to be a Counselor for abused women and children. I think that my experience will help me understand what they are going through.

When people ask me what was the hardest thing about going to Canada, I have to say the weather. Especially the snow.

People often ask me how I feel about the soldiers who did this to me. There are times when I am still angry about what they did, but then I think that they were just kids too. In many ways, they were just as much the victims of war as I was. It's been hard, but I am learning to forgive them.

Conflicts like the one in my country are very sad because wherever there is war, the children suffer the most. The war in Sierra Leone resulted in children being recruited as child soldiers, children being raped, tortured and killed. All children need to be protected. I hope that one day, the world will be a safe place for every child.

I would like to thank the Women's Refugee Commission for this award. I am now a part of an organization that is working on behalf of 42 million refugees. The work the Women's Refugee Commission is doing to help refugees with disabilities, to educate refugee women and young people, and help those seeking asylum, is now my own mission.

Many people have helped me: I thank my family back in Africa, my adopted family in Canada, my wonderful teachers, Susan McClelland gave me the means of sharing my story, and Annick Press gave me the opportunity to publish my book.

I've often thought that perhaps God took away my hands so that I could speak with my heart, and that is what I've done today. All for having me here today, thanks for allowing me to share my story.

God bless you all.