

Those scarred by war find home in Franklin



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA PAIS/GANNETT NEW JERSEY

Shika and Rita Ademu-John hold some specialty dishes from Sierra Leone at their restaurant, Awujoh, in Franklin, Somerset.

Residents from Sierra Leone maintain strong ties with their home country

By **DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG**
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FRANKLIN (Somerset) — Shika Ademu-John always planned to return to family and friends in Africa after studying architecture in New York.

But when civil war broke out in Sierra Leone in 1991, the parents of Ademu-John, who now is a Franklin resident, fled to Gambia and forbade him to fly home. Ademu-John struggled to stay here with an expired visa as he mourned relatives killed during the war. Of thousands of Sierra Leonean men, women and children were raped, tortured and killed during

the 11-year conflict.

"I was stranded here when the war broke out," Ademu-John said. "My parents were in exile; my cousins were killed. It was a very difficult time for me. You had to rethink your whole future all over again."

Fifteen years later, Ademu-John is now a citizen, a husband, a father and, most recently, the owner of his own Franklin business, Awujoh Restaurant on Hamilton Street. Just four months old, the restaurant specializes in African fare — cassava bread and okra soup — but also serves cheeseburgers and chicken wings.

A mix of the United States and

Africa, Awujoh is much like Ademu-John's life. With his wife, Rita, and sons — Shika, 22, Justin, 18, and Kevin, 10 — Ademu-John has forged deep roots in Somerset. But he and his family continue to celebrate their African heritage and support the homeland they miss and still love. And they're not alone.

Out of the 5,000 Sierra Leoneans township officials say now live in Franklin, most maintain close connections with friends, family and businesses both here and there. Several own stores in town and send money earned to family overseas. Others serve on township boards and committees, while also participating in politics back home. At Franklin High School, Sierra Leonean students run fundraisers for Hurricane Katrina survivors and African schoolchildren.

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The ties between the two countries have grown so strong that the mayor of Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, visited Franklin in November. During his time in the township, Mayor Winstanley R. Bankole-Johnson received a friendship proclamation from Mayor Brian Levine.

"We're not only giving to our country, but to our new homes," Ademu-John said. "We have doctors, lawyers and architects who are giving of themselves both here and there. That's something that I think is not very well known."

The Ademu-Johns have a vision for the future of Hamilton Street — a pedestrian-friendly shopping and dining area much like downtown Princeton, they said. But for now, they're focused on putting the finishing touches on Awujoh — tie-dyed tablecloths and wooden sculptures from Sierra Leone and new menu items, such as baked ziti.

Rita Ademu-John is responsible for most of the restaurant's recipes.

"In Africa, you describe a cook by 'the hand,'" said Shika Ademu-John as he dipped a battered croaker fish into the kitchen's fryer. "They have a good hand or a bad hand. And Rita has a terrific hand."

On a recent Saturday night at the restaurant, diners tapped their feet to live music — the tunes of Daddy Ramanu and Sidikie Jabateh, popular Sierra Leonean musicians now living in New Jersey. The musicians' manager, local Jonathan Bonna, is a restaurant regular who works with his wife, Jarieu, to help the needy back home.

"She is so giving of herself," Ademu-John said about Jarieu

Bonna. "She's donated beds to hospitals in Sierra Leone and chairs and tables to schools there."

Other community members such as Joseph Momoh, 15, a sophomore at Franklin High School, send money to Sierra Leone to help friends and family pay for food and school fees.

In Sierra Leone, a former British colony whose capital was founded by freed slaves, 75 percent of people live on less than \$2 a day, according to the World Bank; 2 million young people are without jobs. Decades of mismanagement of the country's diamond sector and a breakdown in government contributed to the war between the country's rulers and the Revolutionary United Front. More than 2 million people were displaced during the conflict.

Momoh moved to Franklin from Freetown three years ago. He now acts in school plays, writes poetry and is in JROTC. Like most Sierra Leonean students in the high school's African and Caribbean Union, Momoh witnessed firsthand the horrors of the war. But he still wants to return home.

"Most of us are waiting until we graduate college to go back," Momoh said during a recent club meeting, during which students shared memories of Sierra Leone.

Students said they miss their villages, the smells and the fun. Momoh most misses the friendliness of people in Freetown. "In our country we're all family, even if I don't know you," he said.

Momoh plans to study architecture in the United States and wants to use the skills he learns here to help rebuild his country. He said development there will produce more jobs, which are desperately needed. "If there were more jobs, more people would go back," Momoh said.

Subie Smith, 17, a junior and

president of the school's African and Caribbean Union, plans to attend medical school in the United States and become a pediatrician. So does sophomore and Sierra Leonean Rhoda Jones. Smith wants to build a children's hospital back home.

"In Africa there's no opportunity for sick children," said Smith, who spent time in Gambia and London after her family fled Freetown. "I want to help."

Miniratu Deen-Williams, a Sierra Leonean sophomore, also wants to become a pediatrician, she said. In school, she plays basketball, dances and studies French.

"These kids are really doing a great job in America," said Fran Badusco, an English as a second language teacher at the school and the club's adviser. "They're enriching the U.S. and are committed as much here as they are there, even though their hearts are there."

But students are still haunted by memories of the war. One student saw soldiers cut off a woman's breast before shooting her. Another watched as armed men stormed her home. A third recalled praying with family in a neighbor's living room after soldiers poured kerosene around the house and threatened to burn it down. One student saw men kill a 2-month-old baby.

Smith said she will never forget the day she first saw soldiers in the streets.

"It was a Tuesday when they came," said Smith. "They said they were coming for peace, but they were lying. They stole everything from us, and we had to start fresh."

Smith and her family now mail money to her grandmother for diabetes medication. The high schooler recently sent \$25.

"She was so happy," Smith said

about her grandmother. "The money made a big difference — \$10 is food for one week there."

Club members are raising money to buy school supplies for

Sierra Leonean children. Helping students back home was a topic teens discussed with Bankole-Johnson in November. During that visit, students asked the

mayor about the country's water supply, problems with garbage pickup and frequent blackouts. Momoh wrote a special poem to welcome the mayor.

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