

Liberian survivor wants to integrate former combatants into society

May 15, 2009

Growing up in Liberia, Gracie Brownell remembers going hungry and watching her mother hide what little food they had for the day. She also remembers her father giving away his share to someone he believed needed it more.

Brownell's family felt the full brunt of the [14-year civil war in Liberia](#), which claimed more than 200,000 lives and left a million displaced into refugee camps. Her family fled to Ghana.

"I experienced homelessness when we were asked to leave our home by rebels and had to sleep in abandoned buildings or other people's homes. We learned to live without safe drinking water and electricity. I lost a lot of relatives and friends in the war," said Brownell, a recent graduate of the [Baylor School of Social Work](#).



Gracie Brownell's family felt the full brunt of the 14-year civil war in Liberia, which claimed more than 200,000 lives and left a million displaced into refugee camps. Her family fled to Ghana.

Nevertheless, Brownell is driven by a resolve to transform places of fear and insecurity into sacred places of healing and reconciliation. She received an academic scholarship to attend Shorter College in Rome, Ga., where she earned an undergraduate degree in psychology and sociology.

She was accepted into the master's degree program at the Baylor School of Social work but had to defer enrollment for a year due to lack of funds. In her first year at Baylor, she was the first recipient of the C. Anne Davis Endowed Scholarship, named for the first dean of the Carver School of Social Work.

"That came at a time when I really, really needed it," Brownell said. "I think God has everything we need, and that helped me know I'm where he wants me to be."

Brownell spent her concentration year on her research project about reintegrating ex-combatants into Liberian society.

She interviewed 29 participants in the Monrovia Vocational Training Center where ex-combatants—many of them former child soldiers abducted and forced into the rebel army—receive job training, a monthly stipend, tools for a new trade, a certificate of completion and materials to build a new home once the program was completed.

The ultimate goal was reintegration into society with a job and a new home. The project is part of the [National Commission on Demobilization, Disarmament, Rehabilitation and Reintegration](#).

Her research, however, showed most did not receive what they were promised. Many said they felt "ignored and abandoned." They were clear about what they needed—employment, relocation, the ability to send their children to school and acceptance into society.

"There are more than 200,000 ex-combatants in Liberia, and only half of

them disarmed,” Brownell said. “The other half may still have their weapons, and what we have seen recently is an escalation in robberies and violence. My mother tells me not to come home yet, that we’re not there yet.”

Brownell will re-port her findings of the study to national and international organizations, including the United Nations, responsible for funding and administering the reintegration program. She also hopes to publish her materials.

“Her first-of-a-kind research provides policymakers and authorities empirical evidence about this critical social program in the voice of the marginalized people it intends to serve,” said Rob Rogers, associate professor of social work and Brownell’s research mentor.

Some have asked why Brownell worked so hard to help the same people who terrorized her family and so many others.

“They were victims, too,” she said. “Some were as young as 7 or 8 when they were recruited into the rebel forces and then given drugs to keep them there. Others did what they had to do to save their families.”

Some rebels helped them, Brownell remembered. “One gave us a bag of rice. One saved my dad’s life. Some were nice.”

More than half of the ex-combatants who disarmed say they long for peace and that even if frictions mounted again in their war-torn country, they would not fight. “Even though they are still suffering, are angry and frustrated, they said they would not fight again. That’s important,” Brownell said.

Although Brownell won’t be returning to Liberia immediately after graduation, she knows that one day she will. Her ultimate goal is to develop a transitional residential setting for ex-combatants with professional staff

who can provide education for children, counseling for drug addiction and anger, places to live and skills training.

“Helping people is my way to minister. These ex-combatants have no jobs—nowhere to live. They want to work. We need to find a way to get the community to accept them and a way for the ex-combatants to be independent within the community.”