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Liberia: Our Working Visit To Liberia-Working For A Cause, Part I

Jun 8, 2009 by Benjamin I. Rapoport and Adam E. Cohen /



Dr. Adam Cohen and Mr. Rapoport of Harvard University meet with faculty and staff of Booker Washington Institute (BWI) in Kakata, Liberia

We arrived at the airport in Monrovia yesterday evening and were met by members of the I-Help Liberia Project. As our hosts escorted us to the Booker T. Washington Institute (BWI) in Kakata, our nighttime drive followed a road through the forest of rubber trees that comprises the Firestone rubber plantation. When we arrived in Kakata the BWI faculty gave us a very warm welcome at their newly opened guest house, and after a round of introductions we sat down to dinner together.

Each of us spent the first two hours of the morning giving lectures to several biology classes. These lessons gave us the opportunity to interact directly with large classes of Liberian students, to discuss scientific ideas with them, to pose questions to the students, and to learn some things about the way they think about and learn science; the students also taught us a little about plant biology. They are impressive and capable, and the message we each tried to deliver was to encourage students to think of science as a subject not limited to biology or chemistry or physics: Science is a systematic way of thinking and solving problems, an approach that can be applied in any discipline, from plumbing to electronics to law and government work.

Following our morning lectures we spent two hours meeting with instructors and BWI staff to discuss their educational needs and to exchange ideas for how we might be able to help meet those needs. We are excited to learn how we and others abroad can help advance science education in Liberia. We are especially excited to begin thinking creatively about how to use the many natural resources BWI does have, including especially its biologically diverse surroundings and very capable vocational training programs, to help the school develop sustainable, self-sufficient, locally available alternatives to educational supplies from abroad.

Some of the ideas we discussed in our meeting with BWI staff and instructors were motivated by having learned the history of BWI, which

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was founded in 1929 as a school modeled after the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in the southern United States. Tuskegee was famously first directed by Booker T. Washington, who hired several notable faculty members, including George Washington Carver. Carver is renowned in America for his scientific resourcefulness, which was most especially exemplified by publishing many uses for simple agricultural products grown in the American South: He found, for example, that hundreds of useful products, from dyes to cosmetics to plastics and gasoline substitutes, could be made from peanuts, sweet potatoes, and soy beans. In keeping with the history of their institution, we recommended that the faculty and staff of BWI seek to use their biologically rich surroundings most effectively as a classroom and teaching laboratory.

Our own experiences learning science in high school were greatly enriched through a spirit of healthy competition. High school science and mathematics competitions of many kinds, including traditional science fairs, are common in the United States, and they are very effective ways of motivating students to learn scientific principles for themselves and put them into action. One kind of science competition that could be implemented at BWI might be motivated by its connection with Tuskegee and George Washington Carver: Students could be encouraged to find a plant or other local product in their environment, and to collect or invent as many uses for that product as possible. In teaching the intelligent and capable students here at BWI, the main challenge for instructors is to motivate and inspire them to continue their educations toward careers in science. Healthy competition can be an effective way to inspire many students to learn and continue to pursue science-based educations and careers.

This afternoon we were given a walking tour of the BWI campus. We visited several classes in session, and had the opportunity to meet and offer brief words of encouragement to students in vocational training programs for secretarial sciences, business, and electronics. We were flattered when the latter two groups of students asked us to return to offer tutorials, and we will be excited to do so tomorrow morning. In the evening we met briefly with representatives from the Liberian Ministry of Education and the Liberian Women in Science and Technology initiative.

We are honored to have been so warmly welcomed to Liberia and to BWI, and we look forward to working more extensively with many groups here in the coming days.

Authors:

Benjamin I. Rapoport and Adam E. Cohen are from Harvard University in the United States who are guests of the I Help Liberia Project and the Liberian Mandingo Association of New York, visiting Liberia. They hope to learn whether they can be of any help in the educational mission of Liberia.

Mr. Rapoport is a student in the joint MD/PhD program at Harvard University. He works on designing electronic interfaces with the brain and nervous system, such as neural prosthetic devices for the paralyzed and disabled, which can repair and augment neurologic function. Mr. Rapoport is particularly interested in starting science competitions in Liberia to inspire students to take an active role in learning science.

Dr. Cohen is an Assistant Professor in the departments of Chemistry and Physics at Harvard University. He studies biological molecules and their interactions with each other. Dr. Cohen is eager to find ways to incorporate local ecology and local resources into science education in Liberia.

Both Ben and Adam have been inspired to try to give back to Liberia as much as Liberia has given to them through the teaching of Mr. Asumana Jabateh Randolph of Hunter College High School in New York



Dr. Adam Cohen and Mr. Rapoport of Harvard University meet with faculty and staff of Booker Washington Institute (BWI) in Kakata, Liberia

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Mr. Ben Rapoport of Harvard University works with BWI computer students..



Mr. Ben Rapoport and Dr. Adam Cohen test electronic equipment at BWI during their classroom activities. They lectured in several class.


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