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## Families Without Borders Empowers Students in Sierra Leone

By *Sophie Braccini*



Terri Khonsari talks to donors during the fourth annual Families Without Borders gala. Photo Sophie Braccini

with the country and its people. From then on, she and her husband, Dr. Hamid Khonsari, have consistently pursued a mission of creating education and leadership opportunities for young Sierra Leoneans.

Sierra Leone is bordered by Guinea and Liberia; it has a long coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. The country has a lot of natural wealth, until the civil war that killed 120,000 people between 1992 and 2002. Afterward, Sierra Leone's economic growth's prospects were excellent until the Ebola epidemic struck the country. Today, prospects are improving again but United Nations' figures still indicate that over 60 percent of the six millions Sierra Leoneans live on less than \$1.25 a day, and the average life expectancy is 48 years.

FWB's strategy is to pay for the tuition, housing and other college expenses of college-bound students who lack financial means, supporting them until they get their degree, while asking them to work to contribute to their own living expense, mentor other students, and engage in community service. "We show them that the more they serve, the greatest leaders they will be," says Khonsari. She adds that, for example, her students now mentor the poorest of the poor school-age children, and teach adult literacy classes. According to the non-profit leader, this top-down strategy of empowerment is sustainable in the long term and multiplies the initial investment.

Over the years Khonsari's enthusiasm and truthfulness have allowed her to attract a group of faithful supporters. They all gathered at her Moraga home on May 22 for the FWB gala. The crowd was a mix of Americans of all origins, including Persians like the Khonsaris, and Africans, among many others.

Inez Wondeh, board member of FWB said she is from Liberia and met the Khonsaris through her job as chief operating officer at BASS Medical Group. It is the educational mission of the non-profit that pushed her to devote herself to it.

From a beautiful home and backyard tucked in the hills of Sanders Ranch in Moraga, a group of Bay Area residents recently gathered to change the world, one country at a time.

During the fourth Families Without Borders Gala, not only did they give money, shared food, and learned about FWB programs, they also enabled a dynamic that aims at supporting the future elite of Sierra Leone while infusing the beneficiaries with a spirit of community service. The non-profit expects the strategy to multiply the initial investment and serve as a model for other non-profits supporting education in impoverished areas.

Terri Khonsari had the opportunity to discover Sierra Leone six years ago when visiting her daughter Niloufar Khonsari, who was working on a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Makeni in the West African country. She says she fell in love

Floria Hakimi is a friend of Khonsari's. She is also on the advisory board of Moms Against Poverty, a non-profit supporting children in need in Senegal, Cambodia, India and Iran. She had brought a \$10,000 check from MAP to support FWB's scholarships to help fund FWB's new learning center in Makeni.

During the event, a Skype connection was established with Sierra Leone and about a dozen students interacted with the crowd. Among them was Ibrahim Kalokoh, the first beneficiary and first college graduate of the organization's scholarship program in Sierra Leone. A very energetic and bright young man, he is now the data manager for the Human Trial of Ebola Vaccine in Sierra Leone. He is also country manager for FWB programs, overseeing all FWB activities in his country. He also launched FWB's high-speed internet café and technology center, which is the very first in Makeni.

Khonsari said that all the money collected during the successful event would be used for Sierra Leonean students' scholarships and other local educational programs. She added that her organization wants to empower students who really need it, have the desire to serve themselves in turn, and have leadership potential. FWB visits high schools in poor neighborhoods to find scholarship candidates and partners with other non-profit such as EducAid, a British non-profit that helps poor high-school students, running radio advertisements to inform people of the possibilities of the programs.

Khonsari has been talking with other groups about FWB's pay it forward approach of investing in young people who will consequently support the development of their country and she hopes the strategy will multiply.

As for now, she can't wait to go back to Sierra Leone. She says she lives here so she can serve there. "This is the home for my heart," she adds.

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[back](#)

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