



# Wheelchairs to Sierra Leone

In memory of Brother Reginald J Nieszner

**Father Gilpin Council**

**# 9760**

**Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan**



## Wheelchairs to Sierra Leone

We started this project "Wheelchairs to Sierra Leone" to honor the Priests serving us in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. For 5 years now the Spiritans Fathers have been serving the 2 Moose Jaw parishes and have had a total of 5 priests assigned at different times. Out of those 5 priests, 4 of them are native of Sierra Leone Africa. Sierra Leone is listed by the United Nations as the poorest country in the world, so as a council, we decided that we should do something to give back to their country of origin in keeping with the slogan, "In Solidarity with Our Priests". We had just heard about the Wheelchair Foundation and their mandate to distribute wheelchairs to those who need one and can't afford one and with Sierra Leone having gone through a 10 years civil war and severe polio, Fr Michael Conteh, our Chaplain at the time, agreed that this would do some good in his country.



*Left to right, State Deputy Marvin DeSchryver and wife Pat, Margot Doiron, Christiana Flessner Executive Director Wheelchair Foundation Canada, Gilles Doiron, FS Council 9760 and Project Co-Chair, Sheila Nieszner, Reginald Nieszner Council GK and Co-Chair having lunch after the launching Wheelchair to Sierra Leone.*

On the weekend of 10/11 Feb 2007, we did a presentation at our Church launching our project. The idea was to raise funds to send a container filled with 280 red wheelchairs to Sierra Leone Africa. Adding to our good luck, the executive Director of "Wheelchair Foundation Canada", Christiana Flessner, just happened to be in town that week end and agreed to speak at our Church on Sunday Morning and be part of our presentation. The impact her presence had was unreal. She spoke about the video we presented and explained what the video did not show because she was present

when the people in the video received their wheelchairs. The response that morning was overwhelming; we had prepared 50 donation forms and ran out. We know this was a result of her talk.

The following weekend we were invited to do our presentation at the 3 masses at St Joseph Parish, the other Catholic parish in Moose Jaw and again, we were overwhelmed by the response. Soon, every one got into the act including the one High School and five Elementary Schools in the Moose Jaw Catholic School System. K of C Brothers Al Thiessen and Jo Buchko set out to organize a "Rock, Paper, Scissors" tournament to include all students in the school system. The tournament was set up to start at classroom level, then progress to grade level in the school, then school all school finalist would meet for the championship at Vanier Collegiate to determine the winners at all levels. Other schools also held their own fundraisers such as mission fairs or other projects. St Michael School



*L to R, Front GK Reg Nieszner, Unknown student, Back row, Brothers Alan Thiessen, and Joe Buchko, the tournament organizers.*



*Students competing at the championship round of the Rock Paper Scissors tournament held as a fund raiser for "Wheelchairs to Sierra Leone" project. The atmosphere of competition was definitely present in the crowd.*



raised \$1300 by themselves with one grade 3/4 class raising \$600 by themselves. All these fund raisers resulted in a total of \$3500 raised and donated to our cause from the Moose Jaw Separate School System.

We were interviewed by the local newspaper "The Times Herald and the local radio station CHAB and we also appeared on a local TV show on the Cable Community Channel. The first newspaper article in the "Times" is the one that the Wheelchair Foundation reprinted in their newsletter. *(Note, the newsletter is included as part of the submission)*

As far as advertising goes, we did not purchase any commercial advertising. All our advertising was free. We appeared at several community events during the year such as "Sidewalk Days" and the "Home Town Fair" where we set up booths and promoted our pro-



*Grand Knight Reg Nieszner accepting \$600 donation from St Michael School grade 3/4 class. These were funds raised in addition to their participation in the Rock Paper Scissor tournament.*

community events during the year such as "Sidewalk Days" and the "Home Town Fair" where we set up booths and promoted our pro-

grams. Our Grand Knight Reginald Nieszner decided in the very beginning that he was going to travel to Sierra Leone and ensure the wheelchairs were going to the right people. He work tirelessly and was probably the biggest supporter of this project. He was instrumental in the sales of many wheelchairs. His favorite pitch was telling potential buyers that he was going to be in Sierra Leone when the wheelchairs would be distributed therefore providing guarantee of delivery of a wheelchair to a needy person. We were also fortunate to receive a wheelchair from Wheelchair Foundation Canada to use as a demo. Reg constantly kept that chair in the trunk of his car taking it everywhere he went. He promoted this venture as every opportunity he had. We also got permission from the Wheelchair Foundation to personalize pamphlets and donors forms to reflect our Council project, this ensured donation made would get proper credit in return. These pamphlets were placed at strategic locations in the city and resulted in many sales.



*L to R State Advocate Gilles Doiron, Executive Director Wheelchair Foundation Canada, Christiana Flessner, Grand Knight Reg Nieszner at the K of C Saskatchewan Centennial Celebration held on 24 October 2007 in Regina.*

Next came the delays; some factory problems in China, followed by shipping issues, including a dock worker strike. These delays pushed back the date for our container to finally arrive in Freetown to late December. With the Christmas season upon us, plans were set in motion for our Grand Knight Reginald Nieszner, our Financial Secretary and State Advocate Gilles Doiron and brother Michael Gilmore to travel to Sierra Leone to take part of the distribution process.

The afternoon of Jan 14, 2008 saw us at the start of our adventure, from Regina to Calgary and on to London England, and after a day's rest to catch up to the 6 hours differ-

All along, the Wheelchair Foundation's Canadian Director, Christiana Flessner, was keeping track of our progress and at the end of April 07 she figured we were doing well enough in our fundraising efforts to order the container and plans were made to have the container arrive in the Port of Freetown Sierra Leone sometime in early Sept 07. By mid Aug 07, we had met our objective and raised the full \$28,000 required to purchase a container loaded with 280 wheelchairs and some spare parts for minor repairs. Then the Canadian dollar was doing well and we got a break as the cost of the container went down to \$23,800 leaving us some money on account at the Foundation.



*L to R State Advocate Gilles Doiron, Brother Michael Gilmore and Grand Knight Reg Nieszner at the Regina*

ence, on to Lungi airport outside of Freetown to meet our contact Father Michael Conteh, himself a Knight of Columbus and a former Council Chaplain.

On Jan 17, we met Monsignor Gandi the acting Bishop of the Archdiocese of Freetown and Bo and the consignee for the container. We also set up the distribution site in Freetown unpacked and assembled wheelchairs so things would be ready for the distribution scheduled to take place over the next 2 days.



*Wheelchairs being unpacked By Brothers Gilles Doiron*



*Wheelchairs being unpacked By Brother Gilles Doiron and Father Michael Conteh.*



*L to R GK Reg Nieszner, Monsignor Samuel Gandi, Brother Gilles Doiron, Father Michael Conteh and Brother Mike Gilmore during a visit to Santanno House, the Archbishop residence, to meet Msgr Gandi.*



*Wheelchairs being unpacked and assembled ready for distribution.*

On the morning of 18 Jan, we started distribution. Each of the Parishes in Freetown was to submit a list of 10 people needing Wheelchairs. Communication in Sierra Leone is not always the best so some people did not get word to come and get their wheelchairs.

Others did and came. What an experience it was for us, the moment we had been working toward for the last year was finally here. We had a father and his son come by taxi from the other end of the city. We had a young mother with her daughter wanting to make sure her wheelchair would fit her and her baby. There was a young man with polio dragging himself on the ground and many more. There was those that came with old wheelchairs so beat up I am amazed they still worked. In the 2 days that we distributed in Freetown, we gave out some 90 wheelchairs. The best moment I experienced was this young man after dragging himself to

our site and being given a wheelchair, took my hand and kissed it. This was a very emotional moment for me and made the last year of work totally worth it.



*Students checking out what we are doing*



*Students checking out what we are doing*



*The first wheelchair recipient, Idrisa Thowet at registration.*



*The first wheelchair recipient Idrisa Thowet with Monsignor Gandi and Grand Knight Reg Nieszner*



*Left, Brother Gilles Doiron with 8 year old Mariama Suma*

*Right, Fr Michael Conteh with Zainab Bangura and her baby.*





*Some recipients crawled to the distribution centers*

On Saturday 19 Jan, due to the extreme heat, brother Gilles was struck with a heat stroke requiring hospitalization and as a result was forced to make plans to return sooner than anticipated and as GK Reg was really being bothered by the heat, or so we taught, it was also decided that he would return home at the same time, so on the 22 of Jan, the 2 of us departed Freetown for return to Canada. The long trip with stops in Dakkar Senegal, London England, Toronto and finally Regina and home lasted 28 hours.

Also on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Jan, Brother Michael Gilmore departed Freetown with Fr Michael to travel to Bo with a load of wheelchairs for distribution there. The town of Bo is situated 150 miles from Freetown and is a 5 hours trip due to road conditions. Once there, they linked up with Father Tony Sevali, our current Council Chaplain and parish priest, who was home on holidays, they distributed some 51 wheelchairs in the town of Bo and surroundings.



*The road to Bo, 150 miles of dust*



*Father Anthony Sevali with 10 years old Grace Conteh at the Bo, distribution centre.*



*Brother Michael Gilmore and friends at the Bo distribution centre*



*Standing behind the wheelchair recipient Jonny Mymme, L to R Fathers Anthony Sevali and Michael Conteh*

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of Jan, brother Gilmore departed Sierra Leone to return to Canada. At that point, 130 wheelchairs had been distributed and plans were in place for Father Michael and other priests to complete the distribution of the remaining wheelchairs. Some will go to the Military hospital in Freetown, some to a handicap hospital in the town of Moyamba and the remainder around the Capital, Freetown.

It was quite an experience for the 3 of us, one that we will never forget. It was an honor to be part of this and to carry it out in the name of the Knights of Columbus. We feel we have brought the Knights of Columbus to a new continent.

The Sierra Leone portion of this project would have been much harder to carry out had it not been for Father Michael and Tony seen here having a drink of water at the end of the distribution in the town of Bo. They looked after us in Sierra Leone, they made sure we were fed and had a roof over our heads and escorted us everywhere we needed to be. This project was to honor them and we know that aim was accomplished. After we returned to Canada, Fr Tony publicly acknowledged in our parish all the good we have done for them, for the Church and the people of Sierra Leone.



I should also add that based on the Wheelchair Foundation statistics, Council 9760 is the first Knights of Columbus Council in Canada to ship a container of wheelchairs outside the Country and also the Canadian organization to raise money for a container in the shortest time frame.



*L to R Gilles Doiron, Michael Gilmore, Kathy Fenton Museum Director and Reg Nieszner GK. presenting a porter wheelchair donated by the Knights of Columbus to the Moose Jaw branch of the Western Development Museum just of days before departure for Sierra Leone.*

As I mentioned earlier, we had extra money left so we looked around and found out that some places in Moose Jaw and area could use some wheelchairs. We donated a wheelchair to be used by visitors at the Western Development Museum and a second one to the Sukanen Ship and Pioneer Village Museum. We also donated 1 wheelchair to each of the 6 Schools that did the fundraiser for us so injured students could use them in the school when required. We also discovered that the 2 Cancer treatments Centre in Saskatchewan, Regina and Saskatoon were in need of wheelchairs. As per their request, the Council donated 2 to the Alan Blair Centre in Regina and 2 to the Saskatoon Cancer Centre.

Shortly after his return to Canada, GK



*Reginald J Nieszner 1940 - 2008*

Reg who had not been feeling very well while in Freetown was hospitalized shortly after his return to Canada and was found to have kidney failure. As a result, of his illness, Brother Reg passed away on the 22 of Feb 2008, exactly I month to the day, after returning to Canada. His death was not caused by the trip to Sierra Leone. However, the extra water required due to the extreme heat we encountered in Africa, was likely a contributor and accelerated the problem with his kidneys.

Brother Reg will be missed by his family and by the Knights of Columbus as well. We want to dedicate this project to Brother Reg as he was the driving force behind it. His dedication to this project and the many hours of work he put into it made it the success it is. Reg was going to make the trip to Sierra Leone from the beginning and nothing was going to stop him. As Father Michael said at his funeral, "We are saddened that your last act of Charity was done in Sierra Leone but the people of my country thank you and will not forget"

Rest in Peace Brother Reg

In closing, on behalf of the members of Father Gilpin Council #9760 I humbly request that we be considered for the Community program of the year award.