

Coming Home: Connecting Older Liberians in the Diaspora with the Family and Friends at Home

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Abstract

Coming Home is an arts initiative that uses photography and film to connect older Liberians in the Diaspora with friends and family at home. A group of elders in Staten Island came together to create messages for the author to carry to friends and family in Liberia. The author delivered the messages, filmed responses, and returned them to the Staten Island community. The project will culminate in a multimedia exhibit featuring the stories, photos, and films. The author used components of Photovoice, a participatory action research strategy, and Social Network Theory as well a resilience framework to guide the arts initiative. In this article the author describes the process of developing and implementing this project with Liberian elders in the New York Diaspora and discusses the ways in which its methodological approaches amplify the voices of community elders, address their culture and values, and raise public awareness about their special needs.

Résumé

“Coming Home” (“Retour au bercail”), est une initiative artistique qui utilise la photographie et le film pour faire le pont entre des aînés libériens de la diaspora et leurs amis et familles au pays. Un groupe d’aînés de Staten Island se sont regroupés pour créer des messages que l’auteure a portés à leurs amis et familles au Libéria. L’auteure a livré les messages, filmé les réponses et les réactions, et les a ramenées à la communauté de Staten Island. Le projet va culminer dans une exposition multimedia présentant les narrations, les photos, et les films. L’auteure a utilisé des éléments de Photovoice, une straté-

gie participative de recherche active, et s’est laissé guider par la “Social Network Theory” – la théorie des réseaux sociaux – ainsi qu’un cadre de “résilience” pour cette l’initiative artistique. Dans cet article l’auteure décrit le processus de développement et de mise à exécution de ce projet avec l’aide des aînés libériens de la diaspora de New York et discute comment les approches méthodologiques du projet amplifient les voix des aînés de la communauté, mettent en exergue leur culture et leurs valeurs, et sensibilisent le public quant à leurs besoins spécifiques.

Coming Home is a project offered in a support group setting for older Liberians who live alone and are interested in exploring, through photography and film, their experiences and strategies for surviving in the United States. The project has three phases: self-exploration and reflection; reaching out and reconnecting; and education, public awareness, and social action. The project emerged out of my work as a public health social worker with a program for survivors of torture and war trauma. Working with the West African community over several years, I found that many older Liberians live alone in subsidized housing with minimal support. The literature on refugee elders is limited. When I talked to project participants it was very clear that isolation is a common thread that exacerbates physical and mental well-being and socioeconomic vulnerability. My primary intention in piloting the Coming Home project was to enhance the social networks and social support of older refugees on Staten Island. My secondary intention was to give something back to a community that has shown and taught me so much about resilience.

Project Overview

The Coming Home project is a therapeutic tool and a community education and action strategy for older refugees to explore their experiences fleeing from civil war. Coming Home is also a means of educating the masses about these experiences and generating resources to support displaced communities. The project is centred on Liberian elders' photographic representations and associated narratives of migration and their strategies for survival and safekeeping. The project has three separate but interrelated components: (a) participant-generated photographs and participant-focused films from the Diaspora, (b) participant-generated photographs and participant-focused films from Liberia, and (c) a multimedia exhibit. The program uses a progressive participatory action strategy. Elders participated to the extent that they could. A common goal of all three sections is to empower people to share their stories and in so doing provide support for others in similar situations. This paper offers some preliminary reflections on the value of this alternative methodology for enhancing social support and social networks in displaced communities.

Project Goals and Objectives

1. To enhance the social connections of and support for older Liberians in the Diaspora
 - 1.1 Mobilize a group of elders in the Liberian community to explore individual and collective challenges and the potential of the Coming Home project to address some of the identified challenges
 - 1.2 Use different mediums such as photography, film, and letter writing to reconnect older refugees with families and friends from whom they have been estranged during more than a decade of civil war
 - 1.3 Establish a means for members of the Diaspora to remain connected with friends and family in the community and in the old country
2. To allow local service providers a better understanding of the context from which the Liberians on Staten Island fled
 - 2.1 Send a Staten Island service provider to Liberia
 - 2.2 Create a means for the service provider to share details of visit with and further educate the Consortium of African Community Service Providers
3. To address the culture and values of older Liberians in the Diaspora
 - 3.1 Use photography and/or film to help older refugees and asylees connect with their homes, land, and other places of cultural significance that they have not visited or seen since they fled from Liberia

- 3.2 Facilitate the exchange of donations between older refugees in the Diaspora and friends and family in Liberia
- 3.3 Identify potential ways for older members of the Diaspora to play an active role in rebuilding the country and preserving culture under the new democratically elected female president
4. To raise public awareness and funding to address the special needs of Liberian elders
 - 4.1 Curate an exhibit, including photos, films, and correspondence, which will illustrate participant's stories and challenges
 - 4.2 Invite local service providers and policy makers to the exhibit
 - 4.3 Disseminate educational materials on the Liberian civil war, the recent elections, remittances, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Theory

Photovoice, a participatory action research strategy, the Social Network Theory, and a resilience model inform this project.

Photovoice

Photovoice, a participatory action research strategy, operates at the grassroots level to put cameras in the hands of people who are typically the subjects of photographs and allows them to photograph the world as they see and experience it. Created by Caroline Wang, PhD, and Mary Ann Burris, Photovoice projects have documented the lives of many ranging from rural women in China to the homeless in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Wang and Burris created Photovoice from the theoretical bedrocks of critical consciousness, feminist theory, and the community-based approach to documentary photography.¹ Photovoice operates on three main goals that allow people: (1) to record and reflect upon personal and community strengths, (2) to engage in dialogue about personal and community issues, (3) to reach policy makers effectively.² Highly flexible in nature, Photovoice is adaptable to different communities and diverse public health issues.

Participant-generated images provide an opportunity for traditionally silenced populations to document their lives and the environments they live in.³ Kids can use photography to express what they think and feel, even on difficult subjects such as racial stereotypes.⁴ Though this approach has been used in various settings with diverse groups of participants, it has been used little if at all with elders. The potential of such a project is great when you consider the power of photography and film to recreate narratives compromised by war. There is significant poten-

tial for fixed images to lead to dynamic discourse⁵ and dynamic films to lead to new imagery for wartorn countries.

One of the most unique and effective components of *Coming Home* are the connections among art, research, and resources. This diverges from traditional practices in psychology, anthropology, and sociology which are somewhat confined by counselling and psychotherapy.

Social Networks and Social Support

Barnes and Bott created the concept of social networks to better understand relationships beyond kinship.⁶ Social networks are defined as social ties and connections and social support as the functional consequences of those ties.⁷ The level of impact differentiates between social support and social networks. Short-term outcomes are more sensitive to social support and long-term outcomes are more sensitive to social networks. Thus, social support can serve as a buffer in high-risk populations such as displaced people.

Social support is perceived to play an important role in immigrant settlement and to have a positive impact on immigrant health.⁸ People who get less social and emotional support from others are more likely to experience less well-being and more depression. Social cohesion—defined as the quality of social relationships and the existence of trust, mutual obligations, and respect in communities or in the wider society—helps to protect people and their health.⁹

In the early 1990s, Joan R. Bloom challenged the research community to develop a cumulative body of knowledge on the relationship between social support and health. The research community has risen to the occasion—in part. Research has demonstrated the importance of social support in determining mental health outcomes; however, there remain significant unexplained variations in the types and timing of support and characteristics of individuals who may benefit.¹⁰ What we do know is that lack of meaningful and supportive relationships adversely affects refugees' health and well-being.¹¹ We need to better understand how people define and perceive social support across cultures and generations. This will be the first step in better understanding its protective factors.

Resilience

Resiliency is a positive adaptive trait.¹² More specifically, it is the ability to regain one's energy. This resonates well with patterns of migration. Migration necessitates adaptivity. Through the migration process, refugees demonstrate their resilience. A shift in focus from refugee pathology to refugee health and resilience can provide "exits from the reductionism of medicine and from the medicalization of problems of living in society."¹³

Community resilience is built in a process of creating and strengthening personal, familial, social, organizational and economic systems to resist and cope effectively in times of stress, threats, crisis and emergencies. Building community resilience is a long and constant process that is tested in times of crisis and stress.¹⁴

The community resilience model is useful in understanding how communities negotiate major changes. Community resilience often strengthens during migration.¹⁵

Background

Liberia

The roots of the Liberian civil upheaval date back to the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS), a Christian philanthropic organization established to facilitate the repatriation of freed African slaves. In 1820, the ACS sent eighty-six former US slaves to Africa. For the following 133 years the minority, the "Americo-Liberians," controlled the republic.¹⁶

By the 1970s, the "Americo-Liberian" power structure began to crumble, culminating in a coup led by an indigenous Liberian, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe.¹⁷ In December 1989, a small group of armed rebels led by an Americo-Liberian, Charles Taylor, invaded Nimba County with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). By 1990, the NPFL had reclaimed Liberia and taken over most military positions except for the capital city, Monrovia. Fourteen years of brutal civil war ensued, claiming the lives of more than 150,000 people and displacing 850,000 more across West Africa and around the world.¹⁸ After several interim governments and failed national elections, the war finally ended. In August of 2003 rebel groups and the former Liberian government signed a peace agreement treaty. In the fall of 2005, the country elected the first African, female president and on January 16, 2006, inaugurated her into office.¹⁹

Liberian Diaspora in New York

The Liberian community in Staten Island is one of the fastest-growing immigrant communities in New York City. The vast majority of Liberian refugees and political asylees who arrived in New York City from 1990 to the present are resettled in Staten Island, in the Parkhill and Stapleton communities, resource-poor neighbourhoods with high incidences of drugs and violent crimes. Youth make up a large percentage of the Liberian community in Staten Island. While exact numbers for this community are difficult to come by, amongst local service providers, the working estimate of Liberians on Staten Island is approximately 8,000.

Since 1996, approximately 2,200 Liberian refugees and political asylees have been resettled in Richmond County.²⁰

The 8,000-member Liberian community on Staten Island is diverse, including Liberian immigrants who have become naturalized US citizens, Liberian refugees resettled by the US government, child soldiers who made their way to the US with foster families, and individuals under Temporary Protective Status (TPS). Individuals with TPS remain here legally but *temporarily*, and are relegated to limited job opportunities and public benefits.

As is true with many immigrant and refugee communities, migration shifts the power structure.²¹ In Liberia, the elders and men possessed the substantial power and women and children lived under their rule. The elders were the nucleus of the decision-making bodies. They lived with their extended families and played an active role in the community. Once elders arrive, families caught in survival mode are unable to give parents and grandparents the attention and support they need. Without reason to acculturate and the skills, education, or stamina to work, the elderly tumble from the top of the societal hierarchy. On Staten Island, many older Liberians live alone, isolated, hungry, and depressed. Compounded by US culture and negligence for its own elders, older Liberians become orphans in their own community and in US society at large.

Child soldiers struggle to simultaneously redefine and reintegrate themselves into their own community and American society. The elderly live independently, with minimal support, separated from their extended families. There is a significant gap in services for elderly in the Diaspora. Many live alone in subsidized housing and are forced to rely on their religious communities for support. Access to medical care, food, and adequate shelter pose challenges for the majority. Though their lives are full of courage, many live in the US depressed, isolated, and ashamed.

Project

Given the demonstrated complexities and needs of older refugees, the author implemented an arts initiative aimed at improving the social support for older Liberians living on Staten Island, many of whom may never be able to return to Liberia.

To launch this project, the author collaborated with Africa Refuge and the Consortium of African Community Service Providers to identify a group of eight older refugees on Staten Island. Potential participants mobilized for an informational meeting about the project. The author fielded questions from and posed question to the community. The group then discussed the specifics of participation and brainstormed how participants could best connect with

their friends and family in Liberia through multimedia techniques.

Partner Organizations

Consortium of African Community Service Providers. The Consortium of African Community Service Providers on Staten Island (CACSP) began in the spring of 2003 to help find answers to the growing needs of West African immigrants, refugees, and asylees on Staten Island. Recognizing the needs of other immigrant, refugee, and asylee populations, the consortium redirected its focus to provide services to the greater African immigrant community on Staten Island. The mission of this consortium is to build a cohesive, seamless system of service delivery that promotes individual and family support and helps immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities acculturate into mainstream society.

African Refuge. African Refuge is a program of the International Trauma Studies Program (ITSP). It serves as a drop-in centre that promotes and develops crucial linkages between the African community and social service providers in Staten Island. Through community outreach, information, and referral services, and through family and youth support programs, African Refuge identifies and serves the needs of refugees and immigrants.

Phase 1: Staten Island

A group of Liberian elders met regularly at the African Refuge office over light refreshments for an hour and a half, every Wednesday for two months. The first two meetings were facilitated as focus groups where participants attempted to answer the following questions: What are some of the differences between life here and in Liberia? What are some of the similarities between life here and in Liberia? What roles did you play in your community here? What roles did you play in Liberia? What are some of the positive aspects of life in the United States? What are some of the challenges of living in the United States? What do you consider to be your greatest resources? What are your greatest needs?

The conversation that ensued was rich. When asked about the differences between the US and Liberia, participants responded, "The air in Liberia is fresh. So is the food. Family is everywhere. You can walk where you need to."

As discussed previously, elders are the nucleus of the familial unit in Liberia. They live with their extended family and play an active role in the community. Once in the US they are caught in survival mode. To this point the group responded:

When you are sick in Liberia you get support.... it is difficult being old here. Elders aren't respected in the U.S. If you are old here, your children lock you up and go. You can't blame them.

In Liberia you are not lonesome at home... there are grandchildren around you, they ask you what you want.

Though the majority of Liberians in the US fled a brutal civil war in search of refuge, many didn't find the peace that they had hoped for. A significant percentage of the Liberian community on Staten Island lives in government-subsidized housing. As in many low income-housing complexes, the interconnected issues of racial and economic justice are obvious and poverty rates are high. Tensions between the African and African-American communities are palpable in Park Hill. When asked about their new community, one participant said, "When there is peace there are no guns. In our neighborhood [Park Hill] there are gangs and guns."

All of the participants came to the US by themselves. They came as refugees, filed for political asylum upon arrival in the United States, or were sponsored by a family member to come to the US. Once in the US it is possible for refugees to file for family reunification; however, the process is arduous, as bureaucratic systems are difficult to negotiate across cultures and nation-states. Once families are reunited, challenges persist:

The Diaspora community on Staten Island is not united. We can't unite. Governments have turned our culture upside down. This is where the disunity begins – in our families. This is not family reunification – it is family destruction. Families and marriages are being destroyed.

Despite disunity the group was able to recognize community resources that help them on a daily basis; Liberian owned and operated businesses, African churches, and a small group of people who pull their money on a monthly basis and give it to those in need.

Some attendees dropped after the focus group and others joined; after two weeks, the group solidified. The final cohort of participants included four men and four women ranging in age from sixty to seventy-eight, transcending tribes and regions of Liberia, from Lofa to Robertsport, Mandingo to Basso, refugee to asylum seeker.

Because the Staten Island community is concentrated, many of the group members either knew or recognized each other. Two were friends from Liberia, two from Staten Island. The time participants have spent in the US ranges from sixteen months to six years.

Subsequent meetings were spent exploring needs identified during the focus group. Two local service providers presented on transportation, senior centres, and case management. As the group met, several referrals were made for case management, employment counselling, and legal help regarding green card application.

After one month of "needs based" meetings, the author introduced cameras to the group, gave a tutorial on digital cameras, and made one-on-one appointments to work with participants on an individual basis to help them document their lives. The group then explored the details of the Coming Home project, including remaining family in Liberia, which friend and family participants are interested in re-connecting with, and why. Participants looked at the map of Liberia and identified where families live, or used to live.

In addition to taking self-portraits and documenting their apartments on Park Hill, the elders filmed messages for their families and friends in Liberia. For some, these messages were the first communications with friends and family since the peace agreement after the war ended. For others, the film messages complemented cellphone conversations that participants have with friends and family on a regular basis.



Francis learning to use the digital camera.

Phase 2: Liberia

On the ground in Liberia, the author worked with a cultural mediator to contact family and friends in and around Monrovia. Within a two-week period the author and mediator met with the family and friends of seven of the eight participants, spending three to six hours with each family – visiting their homes, listening to their stories-and documenting post war Liberia for the group on Staten Island.

Francis. The first visit took us to Clay Street in Monrovia where we visited Francis's home. We sat in Francis's old room and sat at the window where Francis used to sew clothes for the children in the hospital. Via video, Francis "met" her great-grandchildren for the first time. Her thirteen-year-old great grandson talked about his school and how he hopes to show it to Francis someday.

We also visited the church where Francis worshiped for decades. During the Palm Sunday celebration we shared Francis's message with the congregation and delivered to them her donation and love. The church was filled with sighs and smiles as we shared stories of Francis's life in the US. People were impressed and touched that Francis remembered them.

Morris. A Mandingo family mobilized members from near and far for a sacrifice in honour of the their son, brother, and father – Morris. As the goat was being slaughtered a cellphone rang. It was Morris checking in. "Is everyone there?" he asked.

Morris's sister giggled like a child when she saw a picture of him driving his bright red car on Staten Island. On film his cousin, in response to the war and forced migration, said, "A family tree doesn't break, it bends." Part of the family fled north, others fled to Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

We also visited VOA, an area named after the Voice of America Radio, which was once stationed there. VOA will be Morris's new neighbourhood if he makes it back to Liberia. With monthly remittances and the help of his son, he is building a home for himself and his family. A camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) with people from the interior surrounds VOA. There was obvious tension regarding their continued presence. The taxi driver complained. Morris's son responded with a question, "If your house was burned during the war would you go back? Why would you go back? Could \$5 USD per day sustain you and your family?"

Morris has one acre on which he is building what appears to be a mansion. His land is designated by cornerstones with his initials on them. There are concrete blocks and sand on the land – some of which has been slashed and burned in preparation for the building.



Morris's cornerstone

David. Nancee, David's daughter, met us at a restaurant outside of Doula. She is studying computers in school. She sat shyly while we ate and helped us to hire a car to her Caldwell home beyond the coffee plantation. On the drive Nancee told us that she hadn't seen her dad since she was seven years old – she is now twenty-eight. We drove down a dirt road into lush greenery in front of Nancee's home where they were selling candy and condensed milk. Three small kids and Nancee's mother greeted us with smiles. Nancee showed us all the things that her father sent her over the years – a sewing machine, generator, blanket, watch, and mortar mould. She expressed her gratitude but through tears admitted that these things meant nothing and that what she wants is to see him again. She wants him to meet his grandkids.

Morris's son was with us at Nancee's house. This allowed for a beautiful synergy to evolve. Morris and David are friends on Staten Island. Now, their kids are connected. To celebrate, we shared the sacrifice that Morris's family made earlier in the morning.

Jumah. We picked up Gladys and Victor at their home and loaded the car with dry rice and mangos for the drive. Gladys and Victor took us to Kenemah, the town where Jumah grew up. The head of the village greeted us as did Jumah's older brothers. Kenemah is a close-knit community. While happily reminiscing about Jumah and enthusiastically watching her video message, the village leaders did not miss the opportunity to present their needs: "Our needs in order of priority are clinics, schools, houses, water."



Kenemah village watching Jumah's video

Prof. We visited the house that Prof lived in while he was Associate Justice and the house he kept while Interim President. His sons continue to live there today; one of them shed tears when he saw his dad's pictures. Family and

friends fled from church services and work to hear news of Prof. Photos spanning Prof's lifetime covered the walls of his home while fond stories about him were shared.

Jacob and Mary. A large group gathered on Dupor Road including Jacob's brother, his three wives and their children, Mary's brother, and his son. While touring the family home someone pulled an old newspaper clipping from the wall. The faded, tattered paper featured a group of kids with Kalashnikovs in their hands – child soldiers. The woman confessed that one of the boys in the picture was her son. She proudly boasted that he is now studying agriculture and mechanics in a vocational program.

Jacob's grandson looked angry upon seeing his grandfather's photos. His grandmother confessed that Jacob was one of the few people his grandson looked up to after his parents were killed in the war.

Mary's son guided us out of town to see the foundation of the house that Jacob and Mary are slowly building with the remittances they send back monthly.

Sarah Beth. We travelled to the Old Coca Cola factory to search for Sarah Beth's daughter and grandson who were rumoured to live near there. Upon entering the area we met Junior, who took us to the only two-storey building across from the factory. No one in the building had heard of either person but recommended we talk to their neighbours. We walked for hours talking to anyone who knew anything about Sara Beth or her daughter. We found another woman whose life story was remarkably similar to that of Sara Beth's daughter but when we showed her Sara Beth's picture she didn't recognize it.

The Party. In the end we threw a party for all family heads. Six of the eight families were represented. We taped the gift exchange to show folks back in the States. The group



The Old Ma at the party.

discussed next steps – returning photos and videos to Liberia, attempting to set up a computer and a Web cam to connect Monrovia and the multimedia exhibit. People ate, laughed, and reminisced over chicken and plantain. They spoke of life before the war and shared dreams about what the future might look like. They exchanged phone numbers. As the music faded, Jumah's eighty-three-year-old mother, the Old Ma, got up and danced. With tears in her eyes, she waved goodbye.

Phase 3: The Exhibition

The multimedia exhibit will be twofold. The first part will be an exhibit on Staten Island consisting of storyboards detailing the lives of the eight Staten Island elders, still photos of each of the elders and their families in Liberia, and short video clips of the elders and their families in Liberia. The exhibit will be launched on Staten Island, and Liberian residents, service providers, government officials, and funders will be invited to attend the opening. The second part of the exhibit will be a live Web site which will host the photos and videos from the project as well as a computer and Web cam set-up on Staten Island and in Monrovia where participants can see and talk to their friends and family independently and on a regular basis.

Evaluation. The goals and objectives will serve as the primary evaluative measures of the project. There are four defined goals: (1) to enhance the social connections of and support for older Liberians in the Diaspora; (2) to allow local service providers a better understanding of the context from which the Liberians on Staten Island fled; (3) to address the culture and values of older Liberians in the Diaspora; and (4) to raise public awareness and funding to address the special needs of Liberian elders. These goals are in the process of being implemented and evaluated.

At present, weekly support groups, photography, and video clips have seemingly enhanced participant social support and social networks locally and transnationally. Group members on Staten Island have reported interacting with and helping each other more than they did prior to the project. On the other side of the ocean, families who never knew each other are now connected. At the party in Monrovia, participants reported having a new extended family.

Two of the family members in Liberia have passed away since this project was implemented. The videos from this project were the last contact family members on Staten Island had with their family at home. Participants report the videos as being significant.

Increased awareness about Liberian history, culture, values, and elder needs will come from the multimedia exhibit.

A secondary evaluative component will derive from data collected by the Quality of Life Scale for Refugees/Asylees/

Asylum-Seekers, developed by Paker and Chaudhry.²² This scale is administered at three-month intervals and measures basic/biological, social, and psychological well-being. For the purposes of this project the author is focusing on the social measures, which will be evaluated separately from composite scores. Data will be compiled after the multimedia exhibit is curated.

Discussion

The rich narratives and photo representation of these eight elders reveal the complex journeys, shifts in identity, shifts in roles, and support systems that have impacted their acculturation processes. The range of struggles and successes has empowered these eight people to endure some of life's most challenging circumstances. They have strived to regain their energy and demonstrate resilience. Their willingness to share their stories will help to preserve the people's history of the Liberian Civil War.

The analysis of their narratives leads to a more complete understanding of challenges that older refugees face: isolation, limited social networks and social support, limited employment opportunities, and deteriorating mental and physical health.

It is the hope of this project that the social and emotional support gained from support group meetings with new and old friends will help this group of elders to better cope with or avert depression. Additionally, this project aspires to use the visual arts to enhance quality of social relationships and ultimately protect the elders and their health.

The challenges of acculturation illustrated through the Coming Home project persist across class lines. This group of eight ranges from having no formal education to holding a graduate degree from the United States. Class is not always a protective factor for displaced people.

As Liberia reconstructs herself under the leadership of Africa's first female president, the Diaspora community, young and old, will play a significant role in the rebuilding process.

Reconstruction after conflict will not only involve the homeland or the actual arena of conflict; transnational links and Diaspora connections that develop to sustain societies in conflict are likely to irrevocably be integral parts of "post- conflict" society to be reconstructed.²³

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) is visiting the United States to engage Liberians in the Diaspora about the TRC process. The Liberian TRC will be the first to engage the Diaspora in the formal healing process.

Limitations and Other Considerations

Planning this project was challenging as it fell somewhere between an arts initiative and a psychosocial intervention. After numerous conversations with service providers and experts in the field, the decision was determined by scope and funding. Because the planning process was time-limited, the author was not able to engage participants' social networks on Staten Island. Involving them would have made this a more holistic project and more of a true psychosocial intervention. Funding was also limited. At the time of planning and implementation, art-oriented funding streams were more abundant than funding streams for psychosocial programs. In the end, the majority of funding came from individual donors for whom the designation between an arts initiative and a psychosocial program was irrelevant. Regardless, with more planning time, additional human resources, and a more systemic approach, this project could evolve into a true psychosocial intervention and incorporate a comprehensive battery of tests and psychosocial measures.

Sustainability of the Coming Home project is critical to its overall success. Maintaining interaction between elders on Staten Island as well as communication transnationally is paramount. As the multimedia exhibit is planned and implemented the author and partner organizations will utilize the publicity to recruit volunteers to "adopt" elders on Staten Island, the goal being to expand their social networks beyond the African community. Funding to sustain a regular senior support group is also needed, as are computer and Web camera donations to set up the communication hubs on Staten Island and in Monrovia.

Notes

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