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W [TV]: Video Heals the War Kids of Sierra Leone

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Photo: Emilie Reiser

Back in the mid 1990s, Banker White was an adventuresome Middlebury College kid, studying in Vermont and curious about African culture. At the time, he thought his path would be through music and fine art. He left his home in Boston for graduate school in the Bay Area. Then in 2002, a trip to Sierra Leone changed everything.

He'd stumbled into his life's work.

Today, White is a documentary filmmaker who heads [WeOwnTV](http://www.weowntv.org/node/50) (<http://www.weowntv.org/node/50>). Headquartered in San Francisco, the innovative nonprofit teaches young adults in Freetown, Sierra Leone, how to document [their lives' stories](http://www.weowntv.org/node/37) (<http://www.weowntv.org/node/37>) in video diaries, citizen journalism, narrative films, even music videos.

White crafted the program with a former refugee and child soldier, Alhaji Jeffery Kamara, aka [Black Nature](http://www.weowntv.org/node/53) (<http://www.weowntv.org/node/53>). WeOwnTV is a free resource to thousands of aimless young people of Sierra Leone, many of them orphans, former child soldiers, teen prostitutes, and amputees. It also provides a window for Westerners to take an intimate look at a nation they know primarily from news accounts of its long and bloody civil war.



Photo: Bremen Donovan

For the past three years, White has been directing a documentary also titled *WeOwnTV*. The film chronicles the war-ravaged culture in Sierra Leone, a place of more than 6 million people with an average annual per capita income of \$290. There are no schools or clinics. But there are shantytown community theaters, where thousands of staggering personal narratives are being told. White and Kamara wanted to harness that creative spirit, reflect it back to Sierra Leoneans, and enable them to broadcast it to the outside world.

"It really changed their perspectives," says Kamara, speaking from a recording studio in San Francisco,

where he now lives. "Now they have hope. Something they're looking forward to doing."

The catalyst for *WeOwnTV* was another film, the documentary *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars*, co-directed by White and fellow Middlebury alum Zach Niles. The two men became friends during plane rides when White was headed to Kenya and Niles to Cameroon. Both ended up in the Bay Area in 2002.

White found himself drawn to performances of Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees at community centers in the Bay Area. "Music and culture and food, even in the Bay Area, was a way for Sierra Leoneans to come together," he says. "They literally would reconnect. ... It is a healing process. I think especially in exile situations."



Photo: Bremen Donovan

White and Niles traveled to Guinea, where hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans had fled during the 11-year civil war that killed some 50,000 people. They met the *Refugee All Stars*, a pop-African band of orphaned and widowed Sierra Leoneans. The filmmakers were so moved by the group's family dynamic that the *All Stars* became the subject of their first documentary. White and Niles saw their movie as a way to celebrate the vibrancy of this displaced nation, and they were not alone in that view. *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars* toured festivals and aired on PBS in 2006, leading to a record deal for the film's musician stars.

Among the band members was Kamara, then 15 years old. Kamara's mother disappeared when he was a boy, and the Revolutionary United Front rebels recruited him as a child soldier. He had watched his father's murder. Eventually, he landed in a refugee camp, alone and hopeless. His saving grace was music.

After the *All Stars'* success, Kamara moved to San Francisco and, with White's help, earned a work visa. Together, they launched *WeOwnTV*. Kamara hoped the project would bring the same transcendent self-awareness to his peers that he had discovered in learning to record music and video with White.

"It's just like a dream," says Kamara. "Banker gives [the young adults] hope and courage and helps them know that ... as long as you keep your head up and you're ready to do this thing, it's going to happen."

In 2008, *WeOwnTV* was funded by a three-year, \$50,000 grant from [Creative Capital](http://creative-capital.org/), enabling two workshops in Freetown last summer for 20 young adults. The grant also funded the salary of *WeOwnTV* educator Arthur Pratt, a Freetown local who tracks students after they complete the program.

This summer, thanks to another grant, *WeOwnTV.org* will re-launch as an interactive exhibition space. A permanent media center in Freetown will give workshop graduates access to eight editing bays and a room full of production equipment. Eight local graduates have been invited to attend a teacher-training workshop, and a production workshop will be held this fall. Soon, *WeOwnTV* will feature a year-round curriculum.



Photo: Bremen Donovan

“Most of the kids are just living on the streets, so any activity that makes them feel positive is a good thing,” says White. “They’ve gotten business opportunities out of it ... freelance jobs ranging from working as cameramen to translators for media groups for nonprofits.”

A collection of student shorts has screened at festivals in Madrid and Los Angeles: *The Witch Hunter and the Cripple* addresses the demonization of the disabled. *The Blessed Sons: Obama* celebrates Barack Obama’s inauguration from the Sierra Leonean perspective.

White’s documentary won’t be complete until next year, but in May he’ll travel to Toronto’s HotDocs Film Forum to pitch the film to about 400 buyers.

“Helping develop themselves to where they can become self-reliant is the WeOwnTV goal,” writes Arthur Pratt in an email interview from Freetown. “It is working. WeOwnTV will certainly and defiantly make the difference in the lives of youths in this nation.”

Quick Study: [Child Soldiers](http://www.takepart.com/search/all/child%2520soldiers) (<http://www.takepart.com/search/all/child%2520soldiers>)

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