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## **Bridging the Cultural Divide**

**By Sarah Lorenzini**



*Joel Bisina makes a presentation at a Fremont event last spring. photo/Greg Heil*

A handful of local peacemakers will embark on a journey of a lifetime this November as they travel to Nigeria to promote global peace, community service and grass-roots change.

The trip is being arranged by Global Citizen Journey, a Seattle-based nonprofit that was established last November with a mission to build understanding and bridge cultural differences through education and friendship.

The 20 delegates will work alongside 20 Nigerians to build a library in the Niger Delta, located on the Gulf of Guinea on Nigeria's southern coast, as part of the group's inaugural journey. They will go as ambassadors to discover new ways of thinking, living and understanding.

### **An oil-rich region with few local benefactors**

The 20 delegates will spend two-and-a-half weeks with a diverse group of Nigerians in Oporoza, a village of about 5,000 people located in the heart of Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta.

Although Nigeria - the largest black nation in the world with 130 million people and about 250 different tribes and languages - is the United States' fifth-largest and the world's seventh-largest oil supplier, the community sees none of its profits. The area is overwhelmed with illiteracy, poverty, pollution and economic hardship.

Sixty percent of the oil money goes to the government, while 40 percent to corporations, said Joel Bisina, Nigerian peace mediator whose organization, Niger Delta Professionals for Development, will be the Nigerian host for the trip.

“These people are not getting anything for it,” Bisina said through his thick Nigerian accent. “[The corporations] really don't care, as long as oil is flowing.”

### **Coming back as ambassadors**

Bisina knows firsthand the conditions in Nigeria, having grown up in there.

He now lives part time on Whidbey Island with his wife, Mary Ella Keblusek, director of the Nigeria trip, and spends the rest of the time being a peace mediator who has successfully negotiated conflict between warring tribes in the delta, he said.

He hopes the delegates will return to the United States as ambassadors who will share their new understanding of a place that is so often misunderstood.

The people of Nigeria don't understand why people in the United States won't help them; they don't know why Americans don't care, Keblusek said.

“We don't know the impact of the oil we use,” she added. “Those subtleties really get lost on Americans.”

The group will try to work with the oil companies not on a platform of anger, but on an educational one, said Fremont resident Susan Partnow, the group's executive director.

Partnow said she was born a peacemaker: “It's really a lifelong story. It felt wrong to me that we were dividing the world.”

Before she founded Global Citizen Journey, Partnow had been involved with related groups such as Earthstewards, another nonprofit dedicated to bringing positive change through grass-roots efforts.

When the founder of Earthstewards, Danaan Parry, died in 1996, Partnow said she wanted to continue the work he was doing.

Then, one morning, Partnow woke up with a vision of Africa, a place that's so neglected and misunderstood. “That is the perfect place,” she said. “It really felt right.”

### **‘Multi-layered project’**

The group's first stop will be Lagos, where they will visit government officials and cultural sites, according to literature provided by the group. Then they will fly to Warri and eventually travel by boat to Oporoza.

The delegates will stay in the homes of host villagers, and a typical day will include breakfast with the host family, workshops, dinner with delegates, evening music and dancing and other cultural activities.

“It's a very multi-layered project,” Partnow said.

The group's biggest job will be to build a library for the local school children, Keblusek explained as local kids have no library, books or even paper on which to write. The literacy rate is only 20 percent in the region, Partnow said.

“This [is] the right project,” Keblusek said. “This could really transform the region.”

The library will cost about \$20,000, Partnow said, and the group hopes to raise at least \$10,000 for it.

In addition, Youth for Technology Foundation, an international nonprofit that brings technological access to developing countries, will donate computers to the project.

### **Getting the word out**

The delegates must each raise \$2,950, which includes a donation to the library. The group prefers this be done through fund-raising, primarily to get the word out, but personal donations are welcome as well.

So far, Partnow said, about a dozen people are interested, but they are still recruiting.

Wallingford resident Dustan Bott, a University of Washington graduate student in public affairs, hopes to make a bigger project out of the trip, connecting it with his studies, he said. One idea is to create a "business plan for social responsibility" for the oil companies, he said.

In addition to the library, the experience will be the most important thing these delegates bring back, Bisina said. He wants the world to know that Nigeria, despite its extensive problems, is a joyful place full of people who refuse to give up.

“We're still hopeful that someday things will get better,” he said.

The group's next Seattle meeting is Wednesday, June 29, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Phinney Neighborhood Center, 6532 Phinney Ave. N.

For a list of other meetings around Seattle, visit [www.globalcitizenjourney.org](http://www.globalcitizenjourney.org).