

He gives them a voice

By **CYNTHIA WOOLBRIGHT**
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Joel Bisina knew life in the Delta was getting worse when the letters requesting money, even requesting food, were getting more frequent.

These calls weren't from some distance place of which he'd never heard. They weren't from an adopted child through a relief organization. The letters were in the handwriting of his own family members. It was with that growing concern sent via the postal service that Joel Bisina realized the Niger River Delta he remembered from his childhood was no more.



Cynthia Woolbright

Langley resident Joel Bisina splits his time between living on Whidbey and doing humanitarian work to help restore the environment and the health of the people in the oil-rich Niger River Delta.

"There's such depletion of the land, the air and the water. There's such frustration by the locals," he said. "The subsistence economy is so small, and it takes so much to feed a family that they don't have money to also educate their children which is needed for the future."

Now a part-time Langley resident, Bisina formed the organization Niger Delta Professionals for Development in 1997.

Today he spends six months of the year on Whidbey and the other half back in his homeland working to facilitate a better future for his people.

His latest endeavor is a partnership between his organization and Global Citizen Journeys, a Seattle-based group that works to build understanding, bridge cultural differences and establish lifelong bonds. And June 14, he will talk about the group's inaugural trip to Bisina's home state — the Niger River Delta, where poverty, illiteracy and pollution are widespread and money bleeds from the ground.

The trip will pair up to 29 Americans with Nigerian delegates, as the trip is not to just educate Americans, but also the Nigerian people. He wants people to visit the delta — located on Nigeria's southern coast on the Gulf of

Guinea. He wants people to see the land that has been stripped because of the greed of corporations and governments. During the November trip, delegates will help build a library, they'll visit Niger Delta villages and oil installations. They'll see that it isn't so grand when you live in the world's oil belt where 2.3 million barrels of oil are produced every day.

"This devastation is happening because of the world's greed for oil," he said.

"You can't understand life in the delta and get the full experience by reading the news," Bisina said. "When you hear on the news that they are protesting in Nigeria, I want people to know why."

He wants the visitors to not only evoke thought with the Nigerians they will meet, but also the governments and communities to which they will return.

In preparation for the trip and to gather delegates, Bisina will make numerous presentations around the Puget Sound area in the coming weeks.

Bisina is a conflict mediator and peace activist who left a lucrative banking career in the 1990s to devote his life to the humanitarian work of resolving conflicts in his home region of the Niger Delta.

His birthplace — Ogbinbiri — is a typical Niger Delta town only accessible by boat. There is no school, no medical facilities and the people live on the floor of poverty. His mother sent him away from the delta at age 6 so he could obtain an education that is scarce with his people.

"My mother did not have the opportunity to receive an education herself so she wanted to ensure I had the chance," Bisina said.

After completing primary school, like his eight other siblings, his secondary education was on hold for five years when an older sibling cycled through the university.

"It was much for my parents to even afford educating one child at a time, let alone two," he said.

Bisina studied accounting and finances part-time at Yaba College of Technology 1989 through 1997 in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos, while also working to send money to support his family back in the Niger Delta.

Post graduation he immediately joined the work force as an accountant for oil and banking corporations in Nigeria. After growing distant to the immediate concerns of life in the delta, Bisina went home in 1978 for the first time since leaving for school.

"So much had happened to the environment," Bisina said. "There was so much devastation."

He and others traveled back more often to talk about the concerns. In talking to the people of the delta they witnessed a suspicion and fear growing among the tribal groups and a circle of violence among the tribes, communities and the oil corporations.

While oil corporations have stripped the land, poverty has stripped the infrastructure of the Niger Delta. The companies have been held to little to no compliance, no standards, Bisina said.

While the companies are supposed to be giving 60 percent of the profits to the Nigerian government while they keep 40 percent, there's not been enough progress made to put that profit into revitalization.

Bisina said the people of the delta, like himself, who became better educated can see the misdirection of resources. While the big cities they were living in had modern amenities - such as running water, electricity and plumbing — in the delta these are luxuries reserved for the oil plants.

"We're not saying don't take the oil," Bisina said. "But instead, urging them to think about the resources, the vegetation, the rivers, creeks and the health of the environment on which the people depend."

Combating the environmental issues was one of communication. Nigeria's population of 120 million claims 250 different tribal groups, each having its own distinctive language and cultural differences. Forty of them live in the delta.

Bisina said he could see how his people needed to unite in efforts communication efforts with the government an oil corporation versus devoting their lives to violence against each other. He began holding meetings with the young recruits of foot soldiers, the women and elders of villages — anyone who'd listen.

"I had to tell them that this was not an issue of your tribe against another," Bisina said. "Their problems were based in the environment and the exploitations of their land by the oil corporations. We needed to come together for a common front."

Today he continues his work that often involves facilitating mediation between tribal groups, traveling around the region to teach the people of the delta about peaceful ways of disagreeing.

"We need to stimulate the creative potential in them during this important time, so they can engage in the conflict in a nonviolent way," Bisina said.

This is not a story of self — this is a calling, Bisina said. It is one that writes home to him every day.