Background/ Problem:
What is peace when people do not have access to a public latrine and die of diseases associated with Open defecation? Where is the peace when access to a sanitary toilet is a privilege instead of a basic human right? I believe peace is where people are healthy and have access to equal opportunities, including public sanitation facilities in a violence-free society. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Liberia. Open defecation remains one of the major sanitation problems practiced by 1.8 million people in Liberia, especially those in the rural areas. It is linked to the spread of diseases that cause cholera, dysentery, and diarrhea - Liberia’s third leading cause of death. In a small town named Gbartala, Bong county, where about 5,500 people reside, 62% of the total population in Bong County practice Open Defecation according to my research and survey. This statistic shows that there is a dire need for the construction of public latrines as well as providing training on the effects of open defecation on human health in this part of Liberia since in one research report, almost all households in two rural counties in Liberia said they wanted to use toilets every day but many are ill-equipped to build, maintain and clean latrines. My project idea came about based on the death of my cousin from cholera, a disease linked to the problem I am currently working on. The immediate idea to construct a public latrine was also driven by my personal experience of visiting Gbartala for the first time and having to use the river to defecate since there were no public latrines like the ones I constructed a year ago. I started a local non-profit organization in Liberia on April 5, 2020 called ‘WeCanLiberia,’ an organization that is inspiring the sustainable development of Liberia through sanitation, education, and entrepreneurial agenda. We have been carrying out the “Open Defecation Elimination Campaign,” for which we constructed our first two rooms public latrine in that area which has been able to benefit about 500 people in that neighborhood. The construction of the first latrine and the sanitation workshop drastically reduced the spread of cholera in that town because there has not been any recent outbreak in two years and also improved water sanitation. However, there is still a need for more public latrines construction as this part of Bong County, Liberia is divided into four zones and only one zone is benefitting from the first constructed public latrines. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds, my organization has not been able to construct latrines in the other three zones. This is why I believe the Davis Peace project grant will be helpful as it will be used to construct two more latrines to the next two zones of that area which I assume will stop about 1000 more people from using the bushes and rivers for defecation.

Project Outline:


3 https://ccp.jhu.edu/2021/08/16/toilet-liberia-latrine-wash-sanitation/
Davis Project For Peace Proposal

Community Led Toilet Sanitation Project

Country of implementation: Liberia
Project Leader: Deborah Gonkpah
Home Country: Liberia
Bucknell University

The goal of my project is to reduce open defecation and improve public health and sanitation in Gbartala Bong county by constructing two modern public latrines in addition to the ones I have constructed so far. According to the Liberia National Election Commission (LNEC) there are 1250 people in each zone making up 5,500 people in the four zones of Gbartala. Therefore, I will construct two modern latrines that will serve over 1000 people in both zones two and three of the remaining three zones where I wasn’t able to construct public latrines because of lack of funds. This will continue to minimize the use of rivers for defecation by community dwellers. After the construction of the latrines, I will then conduct an intensive training workshop to educate the villagers about the negative effects of open defecation, how to curtail the diseases associated with it to promote public sanitation, and how to maintain the toilets (sanitation units that have multiple rooms for male and female).

Project Location

This project will take place in zone 2 and 3 of Gbartala, Bong County, Liberia. This town is located in the center of Yellequelleh district which has about 25 towns, making it an ideal location for other villages around there to have access to the latrines as well. The decision to select this location for the second phase of my public latrine project came about when I saw my cousin Salala lose his life to cholera – a direct result of the poor sanitation in the small town of Gbartala in Bong County. Hearing my parents and family talk about the impacts of cholera and how Salala suffered, I promised myself that when I was old enough, I would work to improve sanitation and eradicate cholera and other diseases caused by the lack of public toilets and proper sanitation in that area so that no family would experience what my family had gone through.

Partnership/sustainability

This project began a year ago and there have been fundraising efforts that have ensured the implementation of the first phase as well as its maintenance. The major factors to getting this project implemented are availability of land and teamwork. The local government officials: city mayor, commissioner, zone leaders, and people of that district gave me additional land to implement the second phase of the project after I built the first public latrine on May 2, 2021. I also have access to radio platforms, a partnership with a construction materials company–Princess HK Business Center–where building materials will be purchased and own a nonprofit organization–‘We Can Liberia’–that helps in the provision of manpower for the construction as well as the awareness aspect of this project to educate people about sanitation and hygiene. As has been done with the previous project, the local government officials play a major role in making sure community dwellers of this zone maintain the toilets by paying $50 Liberian dollars (33 cents USD) weekly while visitors pay $20 Liberian dollars (13 cents USD) upon use, to compensate the person who cleans and keeps the toilet. This payment method is affordable and was recommended by residents of Gbartala as it is their way of protecting this luxury—the public toilet. Also to maintain the project, as we did for our first toilet, septic tanks will be added to the latrines that will help them control waste from contaminating groundwater and polluting the air.

Project Timeline

When this project is selected for the Davis Project for Peace, my team and I will immediately start working on it to make sure it is successful. In early May, I will start to have a series of messenger and
whatsapp meetings with my team at ‘WeCanLiberia.’ With the experience my team and I have from our past “Open Defecation Elimination Campaign,” we will start creating flyers to visually appeal to our audience. From this period to June, we will start creating an intensive social media awareness on our organization’s page and our personal pages to spread the message. At the same time, the project will run from late May where building materials will be bought. It will end around July 28, before the opening of the fall semester. On the 29 of July, we will turn the toilets over to the town by conducting a sanitation and maintenance workshop where Health practitioners will talk about how to prevent the outbreak and spread of diseases linked with open defecation as we did for the past project.

Project contribution to peace
As common as it may sound, public health and well-being are crucial to the peace and development of any nation. Like any developing country, if the citizens are healthy, they make rational decisions that protect their peace. My project will help improve public health and social cohesion between towns and villages through the latrines and the awareness workshop. Villagers will now have the opportunity to interact more with one another as a result of the common luxuries—the public toilets—they will share once this project is completed.

The 3D diagram of my project, The Community Led Toilet sanitation.