

PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

EPISODE 08

Title: Alfred Jomo Sirleaf – THE BLACKBOARD
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Sound Clips DALET: Learning by Ear:
LbE_PEO_Liberia_Sirleaf_xxx

Characters:
Narrator: Female voice
Voice-over: Alfred Sirleaf, male, 35
Vox Pop, male, 25

INTRO

Hello and welcome to Learning by Ear. In this series called „People Who Make a Difference“, you meet some of the ordinary heroes of day-to-day life in Africa. They are courageous, sincere and committed. They have a vision for the future and they believe in their dreams.

Please join us on a journey to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia in west Africa, where a journalist has a very, very determined idea of how to inform people.

1. *SFX: 24th Street*

Sweat forms on Alfred Sirleaf's forehead. It's just 7 o'clock in the morning and already the heat rises visibly above the metal rooves of Monrovia. However, Alfred's shirt is buttoned up and his tie knotted tightly. As it should be, thinks Alfred, because he is after all a businessman. Alfred stands at his place of work surrounded by the noises of the 24th Street, one of the main thoroughfares of Monrovia's city centre.

2. Sound Clip: Alfred (ENG)

"To my greatest surprise, people who had ideas of mass communication could not drive at this dream. 'How can it be, a newspaper in the street? It's like, Mr. Sirleaf you getting crazy man. How can you put a paper into the street for people to read?' All of them thought that way but nobody saw this idea."

His idea, called „Daily Talk“, is a newspaper for Everyman, for pedestrians, for motorists. A newspaper in the form of a kiosk. The kiosk is made out of improvised boards with three large blackboards on the front. Every morning, Alfred writes the daily news on them in chalk.

3. SFX: Alfred talking to visitor

Alfred Sirleaf calls himself the Blackboard Journalist. He's the first one in Africa. Maybe, even, the only one in the world. Alfred is a wiry chap. You would never think he was 35. His voice cracks quite often because Alfred has a passion for what he does.

And he has great plans for his life. Sometimes he thinks quicker than he can speak, says Alfred, and then he laughs.

4. Sound Clip Alfred

"Sunday morning, may 14th, 2000, 8 o'clock is where I started it right here."

Since then he's been turning up here every morning before the rush-hour. With a dart Alfred jumps over a ledge and opens the door to the interior of Daily Talk

5. Sound Clip: Alfred

"From here we come into the newsroom. When you look here you will see: NEWSROOM. RESTRICTED. OK. Just come here easily. OK. Right where we are now this is called the newsroom."

FADE INTO:

6. SFX: Things being moved about (keep under narrator)

The central Newsroom. A tiny space with just enough room for himself. “Duck, otherwise you’ll hit your head!” warns Alfred as he clears away some posters about child soldiers. Here he squats and writes the News of the Day with his chalky fingers. The street noise and sun rays intrude through the gaps in the boards which make up the walls.

7. Sound Clip: Alfred

“In the newsroom is different for Daily Talk. If you are listening you will hear the vehicles going by. Usually the newsroom is an area where it’s very quiet. No noise, air condition. Everything is fine. But for Daily Talk it’s not like that. The newsroom is on the streets because this is where the chalkboard newspaper is. While you are publishing the news story people are going to be passing by, some of them are knocking and say ,Hey, it’s really time, what is Daily Talk doing?’.”

Alfred doesn’t need electricity. He also doesn’t need a computer, nor a desk. All he needs is his portable radio...

8. SFX: Radio news, searching channel

“Oh, they have just giving the news. ... Ok, I’m listening to the news stories. As I listening to it I try to find out which one is more relevant to publish it. ... Mainly I look for local radio stations. ...ok, here’s a local radio station”

....brightly colored chalks....

9. Sound Clip: Alfred

“... Then we got the most attractive colour which is ... light yellow. This yellow colour goes for figures, when we’re talking about millions of dollars. For instance: six persons were involved in a car accident. This colour is also used for royalty. If we are talking about the president of the Republic of Liberia, or any other president for that matter, prominent people.”

...and most important: he needs his correspondents.

10. Sound Clip: Alfred calls correspondent

“I’m calling this person now. He is called Lucin de Ville. He is one of my correspondents at the Capital Building. Good morning Lucin I am calling from the Capital Daily. What’s the latest development? etc.....”

He has more than 200 correspondents spread throughout Liberia. They report to him what's happening outside of the capital. That the price of gas in the East is rising rapidly. Or about the corruption cases in the North. Sometimes they also send him photos via mobile phone. Alfred then prints them up at the Internet Café nearby and sticks them up next to the report.

11. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

“We want to make sure everybody is brought on board. And the most difficult group that we write for is the audience that cannot read and write. You know...but we want them to be informed. But how do we do this?”

He gets through to them via „informal education“, using simple words, pictures and symbols.

12. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

“For instance if we are talking about the blue helmet, the peace keepers, the United Nation, you will see the blue helmet up there. So if somebody cannot read and write, they stop by and they gonna say ‘oh yes I saw what Daily Talk said about the UN.’”

Liberia is still suffering badly from the consequences of 14 years of civil war. There are only a few tarmacked roads and electricity is only produced by generators. The United Nations Children's Organization, UNICEF, estimates that less than half of the Liberian population can read and write. Only about a third of the children go to school. "How can they take part in running their country, in their history?" exclaims Alfred.

13. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

"An informed mind is an elaborated mind. These people, they are not elaborated. People are blind to so many things that unfolding. They are not participating what's going on. This is why I created this. To get out to reach them. Most of them can't even afford to buy a newspaper, can't afford to buy a generator to get a television set, to go on the internet. It's all expensive. Poverty, poverty, poverty. This state is poverty driven as I speak to you. There is need for massive education. That's one of the major problem we're facing. But if you start take information to the people, educating them, opening their eyes to what's happening, somebody will not be able to fool them.

There are people out there who got something in them that just take need. They got some values in them; they got potential that this country need. You have to get out to them!"

For over three years now Liberia has been ruled over by a female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. She is Africa's first female president. Alfred has the same surname but they are not related.

14. *SFX: washing the blackboard, writing, spelling*

As Alfred painstakingly writes up his latest news story, a few men are already impatiently awaiting his report outside.

15. *Sound Clip: VOXPOP, man*

“Most of the time we pass by, we stay right here and get almost all the information just by just reading the bulletin. And I think, you can't get all the information from government because government will always sing songs of praises. Is the local media that would disseminate this information that the people out there will listening to in great Liberia.”

16. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

“You know, the problem with Daily Talk is you directly interact with your audience. You directly interact. How somebody feels, how somebody don't feel. Because your phone number is there. They see your face. Sometimes while you are publishing a story some come inside. Some of them they even disagree, they argue. They say 'I don't like this'. But obviously not every story will please everybody. It's impossible. You can't just please everybody.”

And suddenly he, the visionary, who is brimming over with energy and dreams of the future, suddenly he becomes thoughtful.

17. *SFX: Alfred's home*

We go to visit his wife, Magrador, and his two young daughters. Alfred wanted us to. It's important to him. Narrow, crooked alleyways lead to his home. Two small rooms are concealed behind walls made out of mud and straw. Children are playing in the sand.

18. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

"My social problem to maintain my wife is a very difficult task simply because I cannot produce money. I don't have an income. Why am I running Daily Talk that is not producing an income? How can I have a media institution, or running an organization, I got a vision that is not producing any income? But yet I continue to sacrifice my time and effort – it's useless, it's nonsense I'm doing. Because of my vision I continue to have problem with my relationships."

Money for the telephone, money for taxis, for paper, for the internetcafe – lots of outgoings but no income. He lives off donations and doing small jobs here and there. But actually, actually there is nothing that could stop him carrying on with Daily Talk, says Alfred as he looks away into the distance.

19. *Sound Clip: Alfred*

“I feel that there is some need to help the Liberian people, there is a need to spread the information out there. So, I’m not gonna be discouraged I don’t think that I’m getting discouraged really easily. I don’t think. I don’t think.”

And then he starts to talk about a brand new idea, a sort of electronic development of Daily Talk.

20. *Sound Clip: Alfred lang*

“The PS-System media has not come out yet, where we’re going to screen images on a board. It’s build on a billboard vehicle. It’s so strange. It’s a bit difficult but try to picture it. Let me describe it. It’s a vehicle build ...almost like a float. At one side of the float ...”

(FADE INTO NARRATOR)

The truck would go all over the country, into the remotest corners. There’ll be a great big electronic screen mounted on the back carrying photos and news in all of the different Liberian languages. Soon, says Alfred, it’s going to happen, real soon.

OUTRO

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Thanks for listening and we hope you'll join us next time for a new story in this Learning by Ear series called People Who Make a Difference.

END
