



Born in Sierra Leone, MIKHAIL KALLON tells the story of how libraries have shaped his life.

I migrated to Australia from Sierra Leone in 2000 with my brothers, sisters and nephew. Before the civil war broke out in 1991, life was very comfortable for me and my family. I was able to complete Year 12, but it was an everyday struggle to survive during the war – schools were burnt down and thousands of students lost their lives. In 1997 we were given refuge in Guinea-Conakry before migrating to Australia.

Life in Australia was challenging. Krio, an English-based Creole, is spoken in Sierra Leone so language was a problem. We were unused to the food and it was difficult to know what to eat and when, but education was a highlight for me. In Sierra Leone we had to memorise and copy exactly what the teacher wrote on the blackboard, so in 2000, when I enrolled in an Advanced Diploma in Accounting, study became easier. I was able to use a computer, printed notes, up-to-date textbooks and have access to modern libraries.

I was a Learning Support Officer with the NSW Department of Education and Communities for two years before I returned to Sierra Leone in December 2006 to visit family and friends. To my dismay, no school buildings had been built, there were no resources or libraries and it was obvious that the education system was not good. Students had no footwear, they had to use outdated 1980s textbooks and there was no furniture in the schools.

The only library I found was in the capital, Freetown. It had a limited collection, little furniture, ageing computers and no internet access, unlike in Australia, where every school has a library that is user-friendly, with free internet, new technology, a wide range of books and an environment that encourages students to attend.

When I came back to Australia, I decided to help to make a difference. I sent school materials worth over \$1,000 to the Help the Needy Community School in Freetown but decided not to restrict support to just one school. As I work in schools, I told teachers, librarians and friends about my intention to establish a community library in Sierra Leone and have been collecting school materials over the past three years. They are currently in storage. I managed to find a suitable building in Segbwema, which I have renovated, and am looking for second-hand computers, books and school materials to send to the library.

This area has 22 schools with approximately 7,500 students. A community library will improve literacy and numeracy standards and can work with schools to upgrade their library or help establish one. To make a difference in the life of the students in Sierra Leone, I am appealing for help, either through donations of school materials or money to buy them.

If you can assist, please contact Mikhail at Mikhail.kallon@det.nsw.edu.au.

Mikhail Kallon is the School Learning Support Officer at Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre (Mondays and Fridays), Menai High School (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) and Sir Joseph Banks High School (Thursdays).

