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[Home](#) > In Canada, President Sirleaf Participates in 'We Day Toronto'; Calls on Young People Everywhere to Dream Big

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(Toronto, Canada – Saturday, September 21, 2013) President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf received a rock-star welcome as she joined thousands of Canadians of all ages in celebrating “We Day Toronto” at the Air Canada Centre on Friday, September 20th.

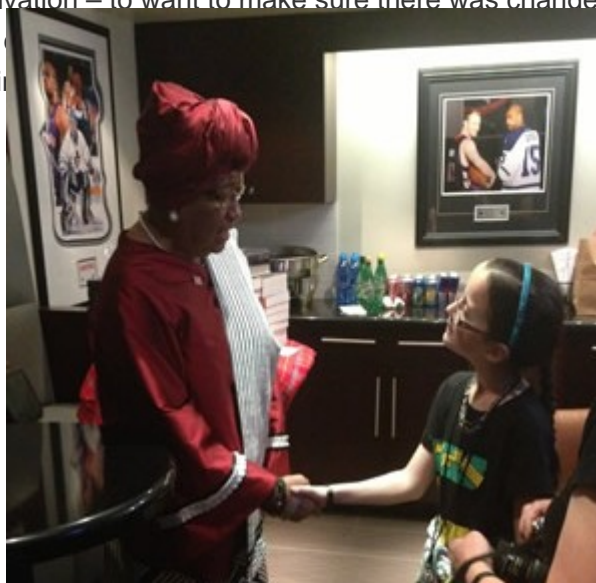
Over the course of a day, President Sirleaf took the stage, gave a We Day shout-out, and sat for a one-on-one interview with Free the Children Kenya Director, Ms. Robin Wizowaty, with thousands watching and listening. She also fielded media questions; met young people who dare to dream big; chatted with the Governor General of Canada, the Rt. Hon. David Johnston; shook dozens of hands in a long reception line at lunchtime, together with Mr. Martin Luther King III; engaged Free the Children co-founder Craig Kielburger for a wide-ranging interview on Africa’s place in the world; and ended the day at a celebration dinner in which she inspired Canadians with the story of her country, Liberia.

According to a dispatch from Toronto, the annual “We Day” event, which this year brought together over 18,000 young Canadians and educators, celebrities, musicians and heroes – all of them with inspirational stories and messages to share – is sponsored by Free the Children organization. The “We Day” event is free; however, students and their schools earn a place there through their year-long commitment to local and global actions. In her on-stage interview, President Sirleaf was asked what first sparked her commitment to world change.

Responding, the Liberian leader said that she had two grandmothers that were illiterate, and lived in villages, and that had been her initial motivation – to want to make sure there was change whereby that would not happen to others. And, she added, “Of course, seeing in all of our communities so many young people not having the same opportunities and made me more committed to



President Sirleaf converses with the Governor General of Canada the Rt. Hon. David Johnston, and his wife, Sharon





Asked how, when she faced difficulties, she had maintained her resolve for her ambitions, the President said she grew up in a family that has great faith in God. Most of all, she continued, “I believed in myself. The more committed you become, the more dedicated you are to what you are working for, it just strengthens you. Difficulties build character, and all the difficulties I faced, whether it was going to prison or going into exile, strengthened me and made me a stronger person, made me more determined to be what I wanted to be.”

As a role model and Nobel laureate, what advice would she give to the next generation at We Day? President Sirleaf was asked. She responded: I think those of us who have the opportunity to succeed must be the ones that inspire others. We must walk the path that others see and want to follow. What we are, what we do, what we say makes a big difference in whether someone out there, someone here in this room, will be able to follow and say, “I want to be like that.” How do we inspire them, those of us, and you here, who have this great opportunity. When I go back home, I’ll go to communities where there are young girls who will never go to school because the schools are not available; or they have to walk long distances to get to the schools; or they don’t have breakfast in the morning, too hungry to go to school. When I go back, you are their inspiration because we can say to them that if they continue to work hard, they can be like you.

In 50 years, the interviewer asked, what do you hope this generation will be able to bring to the world? An animated President Sirleaf said, to loud and sustained applause: “You will have changed the world. Let me be very clear about that.” She went on to tell the story, as told to her by the head of UNICEF, of an incident at a village school where two kids, a girl and a boy, were exchanging blows. The principal, in stopping the fight, told the little girl that girls do not fight, and are supposed to be quiet and respectful. The fight was stopped, the little girl stood for a little while, and then she strolled to the principal and said: ‘Principal, please be careful what you say to me. Don’t forget, a woman is President!’ The crowd erupted.

In a interview, later, with Free the Children co-founder, Craig Kielburger, the President talked about the 21st Century being the “African Century”; hers versus Western perceptions of Africa; the political challenges holding back Africa’s development; the risk of Liberia, and Africa, losing the gains already achieved; the value of pan-Africanism in the development of Africa and taking its destiny into its own hands; the impact of Chinese investment and involvement on African politics and development, and what Liberia has gained/lost from its relationship with China and the lessons learned; achieving the Millennium Development Goals; the situation for women in Africa’s political sphere; her legacy and her dream for Africa at the end of the African Century.

President Sirleaf was the keynote speaker at a dinner celebrating the work of the individuals and organizations that made “We Day” possible. Free the Children co-founder, Marc Kielburger, officiated, and guests included four tenors, the Kenyan Boys Choir, Martin Luther King III, 12-year-old Hannah, the blogger, sponsors of the event, and more.

Here is what President Sirleaf told an admiring audience:

“Good evening. I thought, what am I going to say to this group when I read my 10-page speech? Buckle your seatbelts, get ready for that! But today I had a tough interview with Craig, and I think I’ve earned my dinner.

“So let me just talk about the things I want to talk about, starting off with my country, Liberia, a small country on the West Coast of Africa. Natural resource rich; in its early days, very close to the United States, founded by emancipated slaves; became one of those working for the liberation of Africa; a successful country, using its natural resources, but one that did not take the time to attend to those things that create an equal society. And so, growth was characterized as growth without development, and eventually the stage was set for a coup d’etat, subsequently, fourteen years of civil war that destroyed everything that had been built.

“The process of peace started in 2003, and I’m just glad to have been one of the leaders that started the process of renewal and reconstruction in 2006. Last month, we celebrated ten consecutive years of peace.

“And where are we today? Rebuilding, wanting to restore basic services that had been destroyed; peace and stability; our Poverty Reduction Strategy comprised four Pillars – economic reconstruction, infrastructure and basic services, governance and the rule of law. And we’ve made good progress in all of those areas. We’ve now, with my re-election in 2011, started on a long-term agenda; we call it Liberia Rising, reflecting the fact that, in the past six years, we’ve grown at an average rate of 7 percent, and we’ve been able to put in place most of the basic fundamentals, stabilizing the situation. We’ve now moved into the next phase, which is the transformation.

“But today I’ve been inspired by two young people. Craig and Marc are young too, and I’m inspired by them all of the time because I think they’ve done tremendously well, and all of you who’ve supported them have supported a great cause that’s been growing. When I was in the room, there was a young girl who came and was introduced to me and said, ‘I’m Sydney [Brouillard-Coyle].’ I said, Sydney, how are you? She had told the crowd that she’s going to be Prime Minister of Canada. And then Hannah [Alper] stood here and said all of those wonderful things, and said, with such ease, and that put me in a reflective mood about the young girls, the young children in my country, and how would they compare – the young girls who, before the period of peace, had to run, every time there was a gun, for shelter. Their fathers were off at war, the mothers had to take care of them, and most times the mother had to go out to look for food for them.

“But today, those kids now have a yearning for education. And so, when we started, we made primary education free and compulsory. You wouldn’t believe how the enrolment soared. We put emphasis on girls, even though the compulsory education is for everybody, boys too. The enrolment soared because they wanted to go to school. They wanted an education.

“Of course, when you have more than reconstruction, you never anticipate how one policy that’s intended to achieve an objective, runs into other problems. And so our schools blossomed; our classrooms were filled and we had to do double classes – morning and afternoon – and we didn’t have enough teachers, didn’t have enough books, we didn’t have libraries and labs, and so the quality of education was affected by that.

“But despite that, there are still today too many of our young girls who cannot go to school because they live too far from school, and the roads and the transport systems are not there to be able to accommodate. Too many of them that go to school would still be sitting on a log, or on a stone, because the chairs are not enough. But the good news is that they have hope. They will go to school, and they will learn, and they will be what they want to be, because of an education.

“And if we don’t help the women in similar circumstances – those women who have taken care of these children; these are market women, rural farmers, the ones who grow the food, stow the food, process the food, sell the food, take the food to the table, and many of them are illiterate. But they, too, want to learn, and so we’ve introduced literacy training programs, so that they work in the markets all day, and in the evening they go into the school or church, and there are people there to teach them, because all they want is to be able to have that knowledge where, when they go to buy something, they can read the label, they can be able to decide how they can price their goods.

“And so the theme of what “We Day” is all about – education, empowering children, empowering women – is one that resonates so well with what we’re trying to do. But the reality of our situation is that today I get so animated when I go into rural areas, or I’m driving along the roadside, and kids who, fearful of officials passing by would run because it meant danger for them, today can come out, and they can say to me, singing in a chorus, ‘Ma Ellen, we want to go to school.’ It touches you when you see that.

“Our responsibility is to continue to respond to the needs of these children, to continue to give them an opportunity to move them from the streets, where they sell, to be able to help their mothers to earn a living; and to move them from the farm, where they work with their mothers to produce the food for sustenance; and move them from the markets, to give them hope. That’s what “We Day” represents to us.

“All over Africa, all over the world, what you do in supporting an initiative like this, brings such a great transformation to those many young women, many young girls, and the youths, who just want an opportunity to be what they want to be; to be like Sydney, because they want to be able to have their aspirations and their expectations met. They want to have access to the things that children all over the world have. You provide them with the opportunity and the hope that, indeed, they will be able to do that.

“Africa is changing; Liberia is changing. Today, we feel like we know the future we want. We have the capacity and the ability to get there. With the right policies, with the right partnership, we can achieve those goals, and we’re well on our way to doing that. Great partners like you continue to inspire us and to motivate us, and to enable us to do what we should do to bring all of those people to the level of their potential and the achievement of their goals.

“I said, when I spoke at the Harvard Commencement, my alma mater, and I say that to all of the young people whom I enjoyed meeting today: If your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough! To all of the millions of children out there who dream, help them to dream big. Help them to make their dreams come true. Thank you.”
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