



SEVEN OAKS  
SCHOOL DIVISION  
*community begins here*

# Community

B E G I N S H E R E

ISSUE NO. 39

February 2009

## Life Beyond War

### Mariatu Kamara Shares her Story with Students

Most of us only know war through what we see on television, online or in newspapers. But others know war far too well, having lived through the horrors...and having to live with the memories.

Mariatu Kamara is one of those who live with the memories and scars of war. Though she is now a student at the University of Toronto and UNICEF Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflicts, it wasn't long ago she was a child growing up in the middle of the bloody war in Sierra Leone, Africa.

On December 10 – the United Nations' Human Rights Day – Mariatu shared her story at the Human Rights Conference held at the University of Winnipeg, speaking to an audience that included numerous high school students from the Seven Oaks School Division.

As she began, she told her listeners, "It is a story I have told over and over... and one I can never fully understand."

#### The Reality of War

Mariatu grew up in Magborou, a village of about 200 people, where she lived with her aunt, uncle and cousins. She never went to school because of the expense. Instead, she and the other children helped work on the village farm or with household chores. Everyone, no matter how small, had a role to play.

It was a hard life, but it was, in Mariatu's opinion, very much "a perfect life."



Until the war changed everything.

"I had heard of a war being fought elsewhere in my country," she recalled. "It was a war over diamonds and poverty. But this was not a Hollywood movie. This was the ugly reality."

It began with stories about how the rebels would capture, rape and kill villagers...and soon gunfire could sometimes be heard in the distance.

"One day the elders decided to abandon the village," tells Mariatu, "We went to hide in the bushes. We spent a lot of time in the bushes, hiding in the bushes."

"At first, it was like an adventure. It was like playing hide and seek."

When she was just twelve years old, Mariatu came face to face with the rebels she had heard about. They were armed with machetes and guns and some were even younger than Mariatu. But that didn't prevent the violence and horror that followed.

Mariatu watched as people were captured and tortured. Houses were burned to the ground, some with people still inside. She saw them kill a pregnant woman and Mariatu's two best friends.

The rebels wanted someone to tell the public about what they had done. They decided to leave Mariatu alive...but not unscarred. They held her down and, using a machete, cut off both of her hands.

Mariatu passed out and when she came to, she wandered into the bushes where she spent the night alone; a twelve year old girl whose life had been destroyed by violence.

Yet as Mariatu told the hushed audience, she wasn't ready to die. "My will was too strong. I wanted to see what life had in store for me."

## **What Life Had in Store**

Life had a great deal in store for Mariatu. She was eventually found help and was taken to a hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital city. When her wounds were healed enough, she moved to a camp in the city where others who had been wounded in the war were living. Though she struggled with thoughts of suicide, she was also reunited with some of her family and found a sense of hope and confidence.

In 2002, Mariatu came to Canada and her life has continued to change – this time for the better. She began attending school, learned English and learned how to read and write. She also decided it was important for her to share her story with others.

"It took me many years of pain and tears to come to an understanding, an understanding that has led me here to share my story," she told the crowd.

Today, Mariatu is raising awareness of the real price that is paid during war. She speaks about how women and children suffer most, being raped, killed or forcibly recruited as child soldiers. She talks about how revenge is for the ignorant, saying "an eye for an eye will only make the whole world go blind." She speaks about other ways people

are suffering with a lack of clean drinking water, proper housing and clothing.

She also speaks about how people can help through organizations like UNICEF...and how education is one of the most powerful weapons that can be used to combat violence and poverty.

"Many people and children are dying due to ignorance, and the best prescription against ignorance is education," she told the crowd.

She encouraged the audience – most specifically the high school students – to make positive choices with their lives, from staying in school and avoiding violence to getting involved in volunteer work to setting personal goals and learning "the simple art of respect."

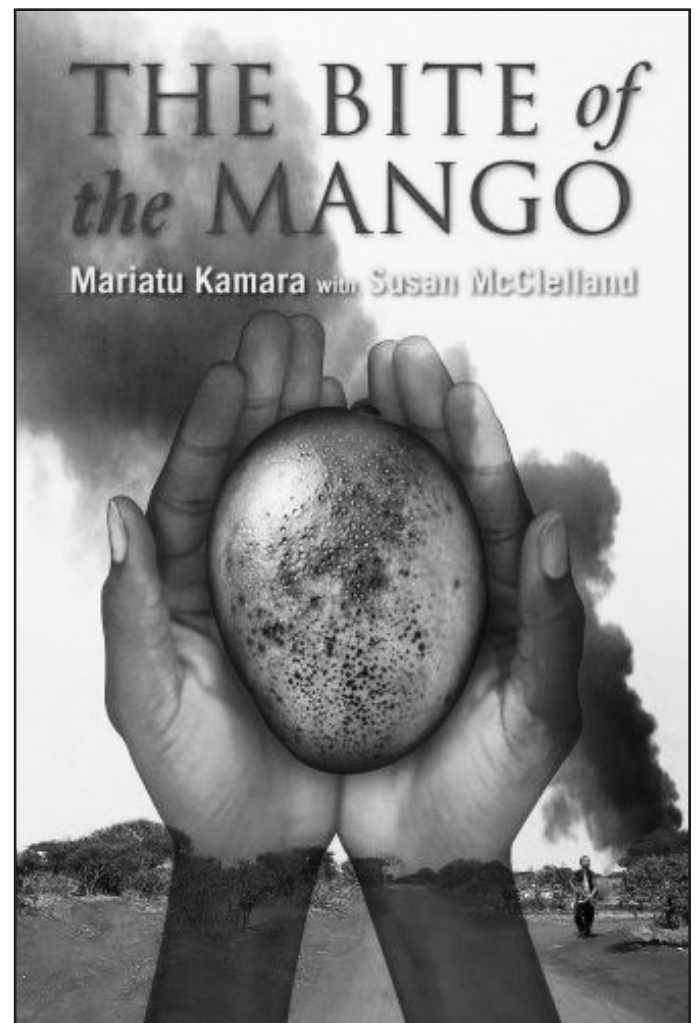
"Everything is possible and nothing is impossible," said Mariatu, reminding the audience of how fortunate they are to live in Canada where there are such opportunities to get an education and to succeed.

She shares her story to help others get a better understanding of the realities of war

that many people live with every day, and to encourage people to make a difference – because every person can.

"Make this world a better place to live in," she told them. "I believe we all can do it."

***There is much more to Mariatu's story than she had time to share at the event. Her story is told in greater detail in the book, *The Bite of the Mango*. For more information, visit [www.annickpress.com](http://www.annickpress.com)***



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