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PRESS RELEASE

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U.S. Dancer Mixes Modern Dance, African Beats, and Child Outreach

American dancer and choreographer Michelle Pearson conducted an intensive dance workshop at the United States Embassy in Freetown from January 18-27. She worked with a local team of dancers, musicians, and child care workers to create a dance program for young children from Pikin Ballanta cultural group and Don Bosco Fambul boys' home. The program concluded with a live performance hosted by Ambassador and Mrs. Michael S. Owen at their residence on January 27.

The innovative performance blended elements of traditional African dance with Modern Dance moves from America, as well as dramatic readings of Sierra Leonean poetry. An audience of local writers, artists, youth leaders, and members of the diplomatic corps enjoyed an energetic portrayal of universal themes such as love, loss, and hope for a brighter future. The child dancers -- many of whom had never performed in public before -- were the stars of the show, which focused on the value of caring for the nation's youth.

At the end of the performance, dancers and audience members alike joined in a wild free-for-all of dancing, drumming, and poetic self-expression, the like of which has never before been seen in Freetown. Ambassador Owen remarked that "... the arts are also an essential part of development" and should not be neglected in the midst of other priorities. He also encouraged the dancers who had worked with Ms. Pearson to stay together as a group and continue their artistic outreach for children.

Michelle Pearson's visit to Sierra Leone was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Cultural Envoys program, which sends American artists abroad to share, learn, and create with their host-country counterparts. Ms. Pearson is a professional choreographer and dance artist; she is a member of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (www.danceexchange.org) and the Even Exchange Dance Theater (www.evenexchange.com) in the United States. Local partners for the event included Ballanta Academy of Music, Don Bosco Fambul, Pampana Communication, and the International Theater Institute.