



## EVEN EXCHANGE IN AFRICA

Raleigh, NC  
January 3, 2011

**Michelle Pearson**, founding member and currently one of four artistic directors of Even Exchange Dance Theater in Raleigh, will be in Freetown, Sierra Leone from January 15 to 29 as a Cultural Envoy, hosted by the US Embassy in Sierra Leone. She was invited by the US Department of State who has arranged an amazing dance project that she will be leading. A quote from Mark P. Carr, Public Diplomacy Officer in Sierra Leone, in his invitation to Michelle:

“In a society where nearly 80% of the population is illiterate, dance, music and theater are invaluable methods for disseminating information. The vast majority of local artists have no formal training or technical knowledge in any of the performing arts. Whatever skills they have acquired have come from improvisation, practice and watching others. An envoy who specializes in using dance to convey social messages would have a great impact on the community.”

He continues saying: “Of the many topics that could be covered, the Post (U.S. Embassy in Freetown) would be most enthusiastic about a program that focuses on combating violence against women and the harmful traditional practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Estimates put FGM prevalence in Sierra Leone at over 90%. Girls as young as three undergo the procedure, despite the illegality of subjecting minors to harmful traditional practices. Domestic violence and FGM are intimately connected with the abysmal state of women’s health in Sierra Leone — young girls often experience blood loss during the FGM procedure, infections afterwards, and/or long-term health consequences. Since many of the women, mothers & children vulnerable to violence are poor and uneducated, social messages/education/awareness in the form of dance would be particularly appropriate.”

Michelle is a dance artist actively working in many communities throughout her home state of NC and abroad. She makes dances with people of all ages and abilities, including veterans, inmates, retired clowns, preschoolers and professional dancers. She has been a member and artistic director of Raleigh’s Even Exchange Dance Theater since 1998. She was a touring member of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange from 1993-1997 and remains an associate with the company. Currently Michelle is the lead artist for the MetLife Foundation Healthy Living Initiative at Dance Exchange. She is a William Friday Fellow committed to improving human relations through dance. Michelle has a long resume of work with groups large and small who would not ordinarily get to experience and create with a professional dancer, teacher and

choreographer. In turn she gathers information and material from those she dances with. This is the even exchange. "As a choreographer, I often learn about the world by dancing and creating dances," Pearson says. "I believe an artist's job is to provide an understanding of common issues in a different, deeper, or new way. Making dances about meaningful, difficult, surprising, and human issues with a range of people is one way to meet this challenge". "My goal is to go to Sierra Leone with ideas that I'm interested in working on as a choreographer. But my primary focus—and my challenge - is on making the kind of dance that can only be made with the people who are gathered in the room."

In the Raleigh area she is currently teaching dance at Arts Together and collaborating with partners such as Arts Together leading Stepping Up: Creating Artful Dance with Youth with Disabilities, ([www.artstogether.org](http://www.artstogether.org)), the YWCA Golden Oaks Seniors, and Fellowship Health Resources ([www.fellowshiphr.org](http://www.fellowshiphr.org)) partially funded with grants from NC Arts Council and City of Raleigh Arts Commission.

Mark Carr further describes the project in Africa: "For the workshop outlined below, we will have two categories of participants - adults and children.

Young participants will primarily be drawn from two organizations:

- 1) Ballanta Academy – This encompasses a music and dance school with a long history of collaboration with the U.S. Embassy. For this activity, we will work with "Pikin Ballanta" (Ballanta's Children), a troupe that presents traditional dance performances at Sierra Leone's Cultural Village – a cultural center in Freetown.
- 2) Don Bosco Home – This facility houses and provides vocational training to street children and young people who are victims of psychological and/or physical trauma. The total children's group will consist of approximately 10 children ranging in age from 8 to 11 (half from Ballanta, half from Don Bosco).

Morning sessions will be with an adult group of 15 people who are directors, choreographers, teachers and performers (drawn from Ballanta Academy and a range of local arts organizations). They are looking forward to a sharing session – Michelle presents on the concept of choreography and dance as a tool for healing -- then discussion and demonstrations would follow. This group would then help Michelle to work with the children in the afternoon sessions to create a theme that would build toward a final performance at the ambassador's house on January 27. We hope that the interaction between these two groups – one comprised of people who know and perform traditional dances on an almost daily basis, and the other made up of disadvantaged youth who have had little, if any, exposure to the arts – will provide rich opportunities for peer teaching and inspiration.

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