

Getting Ahead of the Game

You probably know that playing sports and being active is good for you, but did you know that it has the power to transform lives?

By Nikki Luscombe

Founded in the year 2000, **Right To Play** is an international organization that helps disadvantaged kids around the world through the power of sport. **Right To Play** works in the most disadvantaged areas, engaging girls, persons with disabilities, children affected by HIV/AIDS, street children, and many others to help build essential life skills and better futures. **Right To Play** helps children learn by using games as a tool for education. Play helps develop skills like co-operation and teamwork. Peace-building skills are also taught, helping children and communities affected by conflict.



Olympic gold medalist and Canadian trampolinist Rosie MacLennan recently joined Right To Play as an athlete ambassador to help spread the message about the program and the positive values of sport.

OWL had a chance to ask Rosie about her recent visit to the West African country of Liberia.

OWL: Why did you decide to volunteer for Right To Play?

Rosie: Right To Play is an organization that I've been interested in for a very long time. I admire how Right To Play uses sport and physical activity to promote communication skills, self-esteem, and conflict resolution. When I found out that former Olympians had started this social initiative to give back, I looked for ways to get involved.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Rosie with local kids in Monrovia, Liberia. THIS PAGE: Olympic athlete and Canadian rower Adam Kreek is also a Right To Play ambassador. He played games with students and teachers on a trip to Peru in 2009.

OWL: Describe your recent visit to Liberia.

Rosie: It was an eye-opening, amazing, and life-changing experience. It was great to visit Liberia and see the impact that Right To Play is having locally. The visit was overwhelming for me. When I visited Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, I witnessed people living in slum-like conditions. Right To Play gives local kids a sense of structure and social development, and it was very moving to see how kids' lives are touched by this program.

OWL: Describe the games and sports that you played with the local kids.

Rosie: Each Right To Play program is a little different around the world, depending on what's appropriate for the local community. Generally, the coaches first talk with the kids to introduce and teach a game, and then they play together, and then they talk again about all the values taught through the sport they just played. When I visited a community in New Georgio, Liberia, we played musical chairs and then a series of other games, with each game teaching the kids about unity, peace, cooperation, focus, paying attention, and health. Throughout the program, the kids said that the games made them feel happy and like they had friends. In an environment that was far different from the Western world's standard of living, these kids had hope and joy.

OWL: So, Rosie, without a trampoline available in Liberia, how did you show off your amazing skills?

Rosie: Well, first we played a video of one of my performances, and since the kids had never seen a trampoline before, they thought that I could fly! When I met the local kids, I showed them my talent by doing a standing back flip. They thought that was pretty good until a boy from the crowd volunteered to compete with me and did two standing back flips in a row! The crowd went nuts for him!



OWL: How has the power of sport affected you?

Rosie: Sport has given me self-confidence and a strong grounding in life. It has also provided me with the passion to go after my dreams. Through sports, I've travelled a lot and experienced many different places, cultures, and living conditions, and that has helped me to broaden my views of the world.

To find out more about Right To Play, visit: www.righttoplay.ca.

LIBERIA FACT BOX



REGION: West Africa
CAPITAL: Monrovia
POPULATION: 3,887,886
OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: English
CHALLENGES: Liberians live in one of the poorest countries in the world, and they face serious health issues including malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases like malaria and

typhoid fever. Many Liberian adults are unemployed, and very few kids attend school.
SUPPORT: Right To Play has established several programs in vulnerable communities throughout Liberia and gets more than 40,000 kids playing and learning each year.

Photos: Glen Baxter (Rosie with kids), Rosie doing back flip; JP Moczulski/CP Images (Rosie with medal); Courtesy of Right To Play (Adam Kreek)