

A Liberia Love Story **by Vania Aggrey**

Hello. My name is Vania and I was blessed to be on the team to Liberia with Sara this last summer (2008), but it is because I had the joy of watching so much of their love story unfold that I am honored to share that story with you today. So...

Once upon a time, in May of 2007, Sara headed out on the mission that God would use to change her life. She went to Liberia with a Water of Life team, led by Roland Bergeron. Sara soon met a special friend and mentor, Sharon, who was also on her team, and they were ready to see God move them and move through them. One of the first night in Monrovia, Roland had the great idea of meeting up with the Sheppards—a missionary family working in Liberia. Sara loved meeting the family, who happened to be one very important Sheppard short that night—but she did sit across from John-Mark's sister Melodie. The two girls talked all evening and became friends easily. Among their discussion topics was Melodie's big brother and the work he was doing. At this time John-Mark was busy serving the Lord and the Mandingo people through his work with Samaritan's Purse. He was helping with translation work on the Jesus Film and doing community health and evangelism, primarily in Lofa County. Sara was very intrigued by his work and immediately fell in love with his name.

The Water of Life team then headed to Jawajeh—the first Liberian city to capture Sara's heart. Sara could often be found playing with kids...or enjoying the bush bath. But on one day in particular, as Sara was surrounded by a swarm of cute kids shouting "Mama Sara, Mama Sara!", she caught a glimpse of a dashing young man riding up on a motorbike. Sara had a hunch that this was THEE John-Mark she had heard so much about. And all Sharon could do was smile and shake her head "yes". Although the two didn't officially meet that day, John-Mark has been heard saying that he thought she was cute right from the beginning. But, she would be leaving soon...would he ever even see her again? Sharon seemed to know otherwise and told Sara that "she'd be connected to the Sheppard family someday". How did she know that?

Shortly after that, Sara did come back to the U.S., but she left her heart in Liberia. She began planning her return almost immediately. John-Mark kept going with his work in Liberia and continued seeking God's plan for his future. That year Sara planned, prepared, and prayed plenty-o! Roland and Dennis Aggrey, a handsome Liberian Mission Director, told her that she needed a team if she wanted to come to Liberia for the whole summer. But she wasn't discouraged or deterred. She raised support with Sharon for Jenna's House of Blessing—an orphanage in Liberia, she found her team, and she connected with John-Mark and the Sheppard family by email. That Christmas of 2007, Sara even went to Minnesota to hang out with John-Mark's sister and brother, Melodie and Nathan. She also got to meet his grandparents, but still had never actually met John-Mark in person.

Through their emails, John-Mark began to teach Sara all about Liberia—the culture, wildlife, history, people, and ministry. He also began preparing her for the trip—what to pack, what to expect, and what to avoid (like tubagee). The emails became more personal and more frequent and the two became good good friends. As our team had a final meeting before we left, Sara did a great job of preparing Christa, Nikki, and me for our adventure and John-Mark had done a

great job of preparing her. We were all looking forward to meeting this John-Mark who Sara was always mentioning, but none of us nearly as much as Sara herself!

Shortly after we arrived in Liberia, we did meet John-Mark. Right away there was a connection between him and Sara that nearly everybody could see. They were sort of like old friends falling in love for the first time. They shared conversations out to eat or at dinner at the Humphries in the evening. They walked on the beach and played with monkeys together. They were part of a Bible story-telling conference, where John-Mark shared a story from the Bible in Liberian English and I suspect only encouraged Sara's growing interest. They had the chance to go back to Jawajeh for the new church dedication. No matter where we were going, somehow it always seemed that John-Mark got a spot next to Sara in the van. Sometimes he won that spot a little more aggressively than others...which Christa will attest to!

John-Mark became a regular part of our team and many nights he'd play his guitar and we'd all worship God together.

After a few weeks in Monrovia we headed to Konia where we would spend the rest of the summer doing the majority of our mission. When the two were separated, they took to text messaging each other—maybe it reminded them of all their special emails and how their blossoming relationship got its start. The time in Konia is where the sparks really flew! Konia became the “City of Love”...and for good reason! Whether it was something in the water, like John-Mark's song suggests, I don't know either, but love was in the air. At first it started with Sara and John-Mark disappearing for, what became known to the rest of us girls as, “private walks” or rides on the 2-person motorbike. John-Mark lived in Voinjama, only a short distance from Konia and he would come to visit often on the weekends, which sometimes became Friday to Monday weekends. We had a few opportunities to go to Voinjama too. Sara and John-Mark spent every minute possible together and it was on the bridge outside of Konia one beautiful, starry night that they made it official. John-Mark was so excited that while I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom the next morning, he surprised me with the news that Sara was officially his “jew”—equivalent to jewel, girlfriend, or sweetheart in Liberian English. The two would go special places together, like the monkey bridge; they would make food together in the House of Love kitchen; and they would work on ministry things side by side. Sara helped John-Mark do ministry with the Mandingo people in Konia and John-Mark assisted with Vacation Bible School and Sunday school lessons. They could be seen exploring the sites of Konia, playing with the kids, or taking night time walks. Also, the first time they wore matching lappas was in Konia—in Liberia, that signifies a couple. When John-Mark wasn't there, Sara and I would spend time talking and seeking God together for His plans for the future. Their time in Konia definitely gave John-Mark new lyrics to his songs and God's leading towards the future, and a growing love for Sara.

As time got closer for Sara to head back to the U.S...again, John-Mark was dreading it, but he was thinking ahead. He suavely asked to see a ring Sara had on her finger and by putting it on his own finger he got her ring size. Sara prepared for her journey by leaving money and specific instructions for John-Mark's birthday gift. And the next chance she got, she sent a stack of cards back to Liberia for John-Mark—nearly one for every day until they could see each other again. John-Mark would still hang out with us, but not quite as much as before and you could read the loneliness for Sara on his face. He'd take every chance he got to play the love songs he'd written

for her. After seeing her and spending so much time together, going back to emails alone just didn't cut it! By being apart, they were assured of the fact that they wanted to be together...forever!

As a friend in Liberia told us, "When the soup is hot, drink it." And the soup was hot, so when John-Mark returned to the U.S. in November, he was prepared to ask this woman to spend the rest of her life with him and he had a new special son and the kola nuts to prove it. You see, in Liberian tradition, kola nuts are the gift a man would give a woman's parents when he asked for her hand in marriage. So at Christmas time, John-Mark played his new song and asked Sara to start a new life together with him.

So it is that their journey together began and now begins in another way, but to truly start at the beginning we need to go back in time even further than May 2007. Maybe we need to go back to the families that have loved and cared for them all these years, or to the experiences that shaped them, or to the circumstances that originally took them each to Liberia—for these all surely played a significant role in bringing them here today. But, I think we need to go back even further than that, to a time before these two were even born—straight to the very heart of God. It was THAT heart that created and shaped these two hearts and it is THAT heart that makes the two ONE!