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SEPTEMBER 200

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# welcome



**I CAN'T BELIEVE** it was a year ago that we were frantically putting together the new and improved Aquarius magazine. It has been an amazing time with an overwhelming response from so many readers – thank you for so many supportive emails and letters.

Celebrating our anniversary in style this month was features writer Sudeshna Ghosh who got an amazing opportunity to board the Star Cruises liner Super Star Libra for a trip around the Med (see left), and visited parts of Croatia, Italy, Greece and Malta, all in one go.

Being an avid magazine reader, I must admit there are very few times that an article really stops me in my tracks but that was the case the first time I read about Matthew Morgan-Jones, now famous in Dubai for being a single dad to two adopted children from the orphanage All as One in Freetown, Sierre Leone.

But that wasn't what had the impact – although an amazing story in itself – it was his complete commitment to the orphanage and the children of Sierre Leone that struck me the most. Here was someone who really cared and wanted to make a difference.

Having stayed in Freetown and witnessed the appalling conditions that people are living in due to years of civil war and unrest, Matthew has already contributed significantly to the Dhs280,000 raised by the orphanage, with the help of willing volunteers in the UAE (this amount has literally kept the orphanage going but funds are now running low) and there is no stopping there.

His most ambitious plan to date is the launch of a campaign to raise Dhs1.5 million to buy land for the construction of a purpose-built orphanage with dorm rooms, sanitation, school and medical centre.

This month, features editor Debi Sen interviewed Matthew about his plans for the new orphanage and some of the heart-rending stories of the children from Freetown. Luckily for those in the article, they are now in the safety and comfort of All as One.

Making a difference for these children needn't mean a huge financial investment from people – it could be something as small as offering a few hours to help out in the offices in Dubai, donating clothes, toys or furniture or even raising money through a sponsored event.

Your contribution – no matter how small – will go towards improving the lives of the children at All as One. It was so heart-warming to see some recent pictures of the children's beaming faces as they played with my sons' donated toys and for my kids to know of the joy they brought to the orphanage just through a relatively small contribution.

Dhs1.5 million is an ambitious plan, but I have no doubt in my mind that if anyone can do it, Mr Morgan-Jones is the man for the job.

To support All as One, contact Matthew on the details on page 41 to find out how you can get involved. And don't miss the fun brunch at the Marriott Courtyard, Green Community on September 15.

What better way to start the new season...?

Your contribution will  
go towards improving their lives

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# Remember the children

**Sierra Leone's orphans** are the forgotten victims of war, genocide, torture, abuse and grinding poverty. Now, the All as One charity is reaching out and changing lives through the efforts of donors and volunteers from as far away as Dubai. But there's a lot more to be done, as Matthew Morgan-Jones its country director UAE explains to Aquarius. **TEXT: DEBI SEN; PHOTOS: IRFAN NAQI**

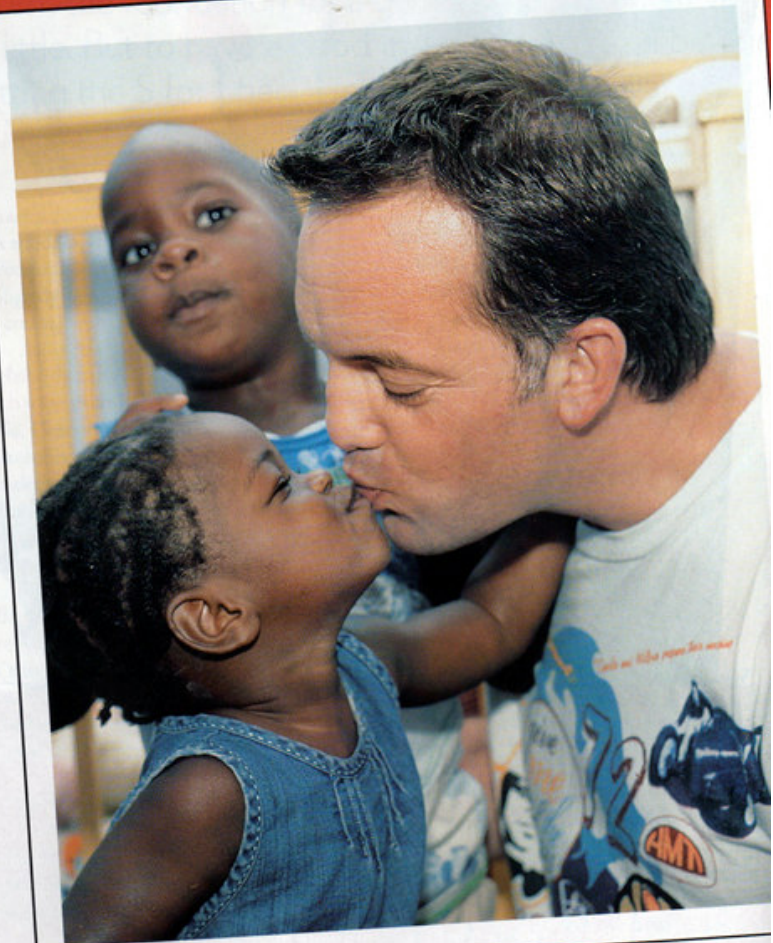
**IMAGINE THAT YOU WERE** poor, malnourished, dehydrated, inflicted with horrendous burns and unable to express your pain. Imagine, also that the cause of your suffering was your own mother, who systematically abused you by pouring boiling water all over you for the past 18 months until you were left scarred with severe burns. And that you were having to endure all this at the age of just three.

For Maury, this was the reality of life until social workers in Sierra Leone rescued him from this daily horror of abuse and left him in the care of All as One Children's Centre, an independently-run orphanage in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone.

## Adoption in the UAE

Expats living in the UAE and wishing to adopt from abroad have to follow the guidelines and procedures of their own country (contact your embassy or consulate) and that of the country they wish to adopt from. All parental studies/home studies are carried out by the Comprehensive Medical Centre (04-3314777 for more information).

Up-to-date information, support and advice can be found by contacting the Adoption Support Group in Dubai. The next meeting will be held in September. email [pwholmes@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pwholmes@emirates.net.ae) for more details.





Maury, who has been at the Centre for the past four or five weeks, is just one of the many children who have found a refuge at the orphanage where the mission is "to respond to the critical dilemma of African children left orphaned, abandoned or destitute by AIDs, civil war, poverty and other hardships." He joins, among others, Saidu, a four-month-old baby whose mother died while giving birth and whose father, unable to care for him, gave him up to All as One.

Saidu and Maury are the lucky ones. Thanks to the intervention of All as One, they now have a chance at a safe, secure and loving childhood, with access to four square meals a day, medicine, clean water, toys, blankets, cuddles, an education and more. But for those less fortunate who continue to slip through the cracks, Sierra Leone remains hell on earth.

### Sierra Leone in crisis

The statistics provide a cold hard look at the mess that years of civil war, unstable government, corruption, illegal diamond

The civil war, which ended with the intervention of Britain and the UN peacekeeping corps in 2002, was a horrendously brutal and violent one during which rebel fighters routinely used amputation as a weapon of intimidation and force over their victims, a lot of whom were children. The war left some 50,000 dead, but those who survived are the 'walking wounded', still scarred by the trauma of the unspeakable atrocities they endured.

### Innocent victims

Inevitably, it is the weakest ones who suffer the most. Saidu's story is, unfortunately, a typical one for many babies in Sierra Leone, where the mother dies in childbirth, the parents are unmarried, and the infant is abandoned to its fate, often in the graveyard; a clear sign that the child is unwanted.

"But," says Matthew Morgan-Jones who is country director at All as One's UAE chapter and adoptive single father to two children from the orphanage, "you can't judge a parent's actions based on a 'Western' point of view, because you have to remember that

"It's amazing how little it takes to make a difference," adds Morgan-Jones with a big smile. Now Saidu and Maury are adjusting to a new life in the orphanage, and waiting in hope that one day they will be adopted into loving families abroad.

As babies and toddlers, the future's brighter for Saidu and Maury, who have a much higher chance of being adopted internationally, than it is for the many older children that are currently in the orphanage.

One of these older children is Samuella, a 10-year old with a brutal past. At age three, she became a victim of the rebel torture when she was thrown into a fire and badly burned. Her right hand and arm are bound to this day, but since coming into care, she has blossomed into a confident, caring and outgoing child.

According to Morgan-Jones, international statistics show that 95 per cent of adoptions are those of toddlers and babies, which leaves very little hope for older children like Samuella who have already been at All as One for the past six or seven years. What then, does the future hold for them?



From l to r: Matthew Morgan-Jones with his children Dauda and Magda, Volunteers from the Marriott packing boxes bound for Sierra Leone.

trading and ethnic rivalry have left behind in Sierra Leone. The African country has been listed as the world's "least livable" country, based on poverty and on the poor quality of life endured by its citizens.

Life expectancy stands at age 39 for men, and 42 for women, and the average income is the lowest in the world. Burdened with an economy that increasingly relies on the country's rich gold and diamond deposits and on extracting unsustainable resources, the country has been further weakened as progressive governments have neglected to develop infrastructure and industry. There is, for example, no social welfare system, or state-run orphanage in the country.

this is the poorest country in the world with a history of civil war, where rape is very common, and where, although the war is over, it's not over, because people's traumas have not been dealt with."

### There is hope

When Saidu came into the All as One orphanage at the start of the rainy season (with the prospect of malaria looming), he was weakened, malnourished, dehydrated and had only a 50-50 chance of surviving, but as soon as he was put into intensive care, and fed specialist formula he started to show a considerable improvement in just two or three days.

### Seven ways to help

- Sponsor a child
- Donate urgent items
- Have a garage sale and donate the proceeds
- Activate your colleagues and donate as a group
- Persuade your company to donate
- Activate friends and your children (and their schools) to organise fundraisers
- Volunteer with admin/pr/book keeping at the Dubai office

Email Matthew Morgan-Jones at [matthew@allasone.org](mailto:matthew@allasone.org)

### Dubai and the future

All as One is working towards just this; a future for all the children. So far, it has raised approximately Dh\$280,000 from various fundraisers and a particularly



generous donor in Dubai, but Morgan-Jones has his sights set on more ambitious stuff. "What we really want to target are companies, in addition, of course, to individual donors. If we can get 10 or 12 people to donate Dh\$30,000 each on an annual basis, that would really help relieve the pressure," he tells me, adding that, at the moment, things are so hand-to-mouth that he must raise Dh\$40,000 in September so the charity won't run into a financial crisis.

Dubai's financial contribution has gone towards operational costs (it takes about Dh\$30,000 to run and maintain the orphanage every month) as well as towards buying two large water tanks to use for storage, as the water supply in Freetown is erratic. Morgan-Jones says lack of access to clean water can be a major problem in a tropical country. Aside from the more obvious complications that a shortage of water can lead to, the children suffer from skin complaints and rashes when they can't wash. The money has also gone into building a new, open-plan kitchen away from the buildings where the children are housed. Earlier, the orphanage relied on traditional open fire cooking areas, which caused concern about smoke and safety issues.

### Working for tomorrow

It's the start of a long road ahead. Aside from the ongoing challenge of meeting maintenance costs, Morgan-Jones also plans to launch a campaign at the end of September to raise Dh\$1.5 million. The "building project" as he calls it, aims to raise funds to buy a plot of land and construct a purpose-built orphanage with proper dorm rooms, sanitation, a school with 10 classrooms, a medical centre with wards for the children, an admin building and a maternity wing.

Down the road, there are plans to expand the scope of the charity, with vocational training and

### Meeting Angelina

Matthew Morgan-Jones first saw Angelina Jolie at the Brintamani hotel in Sierra Leone.

"I went up to her and I could see in her eyes that she was going: 'Oh no, here we go again!' so I said: 'I'm here in the process of adopting two children and I think it's really a positive sign that you're here.' At that, she totally changed and moved over on the sofa, and gestured to me to come and sit with her. She was lovely and she just opened up from then on and told me that she had just come from Ethiopia where she had gone to see her soon-to-be-adopted daughter. 'Well done, good for you,' she said, adding: 'Make sure you have good people around, as on your own, it is quite emotionally draining.' Then, when I went to London a while later, she and Brad were in the news!"



adult education programmes, a computer training centre and an English language learning centre. The training programmes, he hopes, will provide the orphanage's older children with the skills they need to be absorbed into the workforce, either in government or at the orphanage as staff.

It's a staggering task, raising that amount of money, but Morgan-Jones is confident that applying for grants, asking for donations, even requesting Dubai schools to sponsor a classroom each, will work towards making it happen.

### What you can do now

I ask him what sort of assistance he needs now from Dubai. "Please, if you can, do encourage your company to donate to All as One, or, if you as an individual would like to sponsor a child for a minimum monthly donation of Dh\$120, contact us," he says (see box for more details). All as One has recently been granted a license to operate as a non-profit organisation in Dubai, and is now registered through the Dubai Aid and Humanitarian City through the efforts of CEO Barbara Catek.

At the end of September, DHL, Danzas and PWC Logistics are sponsoring containers to Sierra Leone, and this, says Morgan-Jones, is a "huge opportunity" for the orphanage to get their hands on much-needed items:

- single mattresses and durable single beds
- school desks and chairs and dining room equipment
- second hand computers in good condition
- outdoor playground equipment and stationery items

I then ask him if it all sometimes seems like a bottomless pit, with no end in sight, and he's quick to deny it. "I don't think that there is no hope. If you focused on Africa and on Sierra Leone, you might begin to feel as though it were a bottomless pit. But when you focus on one thing like the orphanage, then there is hope. If Dubai hadn't intervened, then the little boy Saidu would be dead and Maury might still be getting abused."

He adds that if we all focus on what we can do, rather than on the big picture, then we can make a difference. And as a single father to two adoptive children from the orphanage, he should know all about that.

Maury with his doll from Dubai, Samuella with gifts from Dubai and baby Saidu (right).





## Making a difference

He talks about his life as a single dad, which must be very demanding. I ask him what he will tell his children about their history and heritage, and he says that it is a work in progress. Both his children Dauda and Magda are already aware of their birth history and know that they are from Sierra Leone. There are books and photos to look at and stories to tell, to remind the children of their culture and roots, and Morgan-Jones hopes to take them back for regular trips.

For him, it's all about finding a balance and putting things into perspective: "I make sure we have quality time together and also ensure that there are special things in our routine that we all look forward to, like bath and bed time and Fridays which we call our 'family day.'"

The downside of single parenting? "I have no one to share the worries and celebrations with, but I do have a brilliant support network of adoptive families who have been through

the same process together with me. Adopting has been far more enjoyable and rewarding than I thought!"

## Putting humanity back into focus

I want to know what it's like in Sierra Leone, so Morgan-Jones tries to describe it for me: the harrowing first time visit to bustling Freetown. There he saw the amputee children in the shanty towns and witnessed young kids struggling to earn a living by clearing out an open drain of human excrement with their bare hands. He paints a heart-wrenching picture of one young boy, aged about seven, standing there in a tee shirt way too big for him, weighed down with a basket of the excrement on his head, some of it dripping down his face.

"It made me realise how unfair the world is and it traumatised me as an individual," he says. And then he adds, half-exasperated, half-

laughing: "What are we teaching our kids if we're constantly taking them shopping? There's so much over-consumption here in Dubai, but it's about putting humanity back on the shopping list and teaching our children to have values."

"The people in Sierra Leone have nothing but they will give (you) everything."

He describes a moment of utter despair in Sierra Leone, a low point when, overcome by the sights and sounds of suffering and deprivation, he asked a fellow adoptive parent: "Where is God?" and pat came the reply, a quote from Mother Teresa: "It's not God that allows these people to die, it's you and I."

## Upcoming events

Friday September 15 – family brunch at the Marriott Courtyard Hotel (Green Community) with flowing beverages, prizes to win and entertainment for the kids.

November end – All as One African Ball, date and venue to be confirmed

## About All as One

All as One has been a registered charity and a non-profit organisation since 1997. Today the orphanage is home to 75 children ranging in age from 0 to 16. There is a staff of around 30 people: teachers, social workers, nurses, carers, cooks and security people. The orphanage provides shelter, food, clothing and schooling along with basic medical care. [www.allasone.org](http://www.allasone.org)

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