

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

OLU MENJAY BAPTIST REBUILDER



(Photo courtesy of
Collen Burroughs)

Who: Olu Menjay


Where: Liberia, West Africa

When: Present

What he does: Rebuilds a school in Liberia to give hope after a destructive civil war

Morning begins at the Ricks Institute School near **Monrovia, Liberia**, in Africa as students gather around the flagpole at 7:30. They recite the pledge of allegiance and sing the national anthem and school song before going to the auditorium for a time of devotion and announcements. Following the assembly, the students report to their classroom space to continue the school day by studying different subjects. Students carry a notebook for each class into which they copy down notes from the blackboard. In class, they discuss their reading assignments from the day before.

This description of an average school day at the Ricks



Liberia is an African country that started as an American colony in 1821 to give freed slaves a place to return to Africa. Liberia became an independent country in 1847. The capital of Liberia is Monrovia.

Institute sounds much like a typical school day at any number of schools in the United States or in other parts of the world. But life at Ricks Institute presents many more challenges than most schoolchildren or teachers face.

At Ricks Institute, textbooks are rare. The school's buildings are under repair after they were nearly destroyed by armies in the nation's recent civil war. Teachers make a salary of only \$120 per month, which is a tremendous increase from the \$17-per-month salaries when the school reopened after the war. The school's principal, Olu Menjay, tries to rebuild and revive this school to offer hope and a future to Liberia's children.

Olu Menjay was once one of those Liberian children. The son of a Baptist preacher, Olu was born in a Baptist hospital in Nigeria while his father attended seminary there. When he was two years old, Olu's family moved to the northern part of Liberia. Since Olu grew up in the home of a Baptist pastor, church was a significant part of his life. At age eleven, Olu decided to accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior and was baptized in Ebenezer Baptist Church in Sanniquellie.

Although his family was Baptist, Olu attended a Catholic school. As he studied and made friends with

people from other Christian backgrounds, he learned the importance of being open to the beliefs and practices of others. At church, Olu took leadership in the Royal Ambassadors (RA) program, a Baptist program that teaches boys about missions. He spent vacations from school at RA camps and as a teenager was appointed the vice president of the RA program for all of Liberia. The RA program taught Olu much about the Bible and gave him opportunities for leadership in his church.

Olu's family moved to the capital city of Monrovia when he was a teenager. There he attended a national Baptist high school, Suehn Mission School. During his twelfth-grade year, Olu's high school education was interrupted. On Christmas Eve in 1989, a rebel army attacked Liberia's army. The two armies fought for control of Liberia for many years, with the violence continuing until 2003. Food was scarce, the nation was overtaken by disorder and chaos, and violence and death were all around. Olu completed his coursework, but due to the war, he never graduated. Instead, the war forced him to separate



from his family. He hitchhiked to northern Liberia to escape the tragedy. As a refugee, he went to the Ivory Coast where he worked on a farm to survive.

While living and surviving in the Ivory Coast, Olu got in contact with a Southern Baptist missionary couple from the United States who served in Liberia. The missionary couple made arrangements for Olu to leave Africa to go to college in the United States. Olu received scholarships to attend Truett-McConnell College in Cleveland, Georgia, where he earned a degree in business.

Olu arrived at Truett-McConnell in the winter of 1991 with nothing but the clothes on his back. As he studied at the college, he was disappointed that some of the students there teased him about the way he talked. He was discouraged that he had come so far to a place that he thought would offer him respect, but instead he had been ridiculed. One of his teachers, however, gave him encouragement by telling the other students that Olu was one of the best students at Truett-McConnell.

Upon Olu's graduation from Truett-McConnell, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Cleveland befriended him and helped him continue his education at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. There Olu studied religion and sociology. He planned to learn about public policy so that he could work for the betterment of his country.

During his time at Mercer, however, Olu began to understand a calling from God to go into the ministry. Olu had experienced this outward calling since his days of

participating in the RA program, as others had encouraged his preaching and leadership skills. Now, he experienced an inward calling as he felt calmness about what God wanted him to do. Olu graduated from Mercer and went to seminary at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina.

In North Carolina, Olu studied missions. Following his graduation, he served at Lewis Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. There he learned administrative skills and got ministry experience. His three and a half years there were very meaningful.

In 2001, Olu enrolled in Boston University to study theology. He completed his coursework and was called to go back to serve in Liberia. He had always wanted to



Olu preaching in the chapel of Rick's Institute (Photo courtesy of Michael Helms)

go back to Liberia, and he thought that he might return to teach missions at the Baptist seminary there. Instead, a new opportunity arose.

As the war in Liberia had slowed down, Baptist leaders in Liberia asked Olu to come home and try to rebuild Ricks Institute. Ricks Institute had been a prestigious boarding school where only the brightest and the wealthiest children attended. Ricks had been known for its excellent education. Some of the best leaders in Liberia were graduates of Ricks Institute. Olu was excited about the opportunity to go there.

But the Ricks Institute that Olu remembered from before the war was not the same Ricks Institute that he found when he returned to Liberia in 2005. When the fighting had begun in 1989, armies took over the school grounds. The buildings were vandalized and looted. Dirt roads were torn up by military vehicles. The grass had grown high. Lizards lived in the empty dormitories. When Olu stood at the gate of the school and looked at what had become of it, he nearly turned around and went back to the United States. He was discouraged, and the school faced so many challenges. One question kept him there: "If I don't do it, who will do it?"

Olu stayed, and he began to try to figure out where to start with the rebuilding of Ricks. He began by cutting the grass. He wanted to give the students and the teachers there a sense of pride in their school, so they cut the grass and started making repairs on the classrooms. Since Olu arrived in February of 2005, they have painted art scenes



*Olu with Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
(Photo courtesy of Olu Menjay)*

on walls and rebuilt the girls' and boys' dormitories. A free medical clinic provides health care for students as well as nearby villagers and communities. They have planted new banana trees and added chickens, goats, pigs, and cows so that the students can help to support the school financially. Ricks Institute has committed to a five-year plan to offer quality education for students in kindergarten through sixth grade—completely free. The school is the only private school in the country to launch such a program. Olu has worked to create hope and dignity at Ricks Institute again.

Ricks Institute, like the country of Liberia, still has much

rebuilding to do and faces many challenges. But Olu wants the Liberians to take responsibility for their future, and he is committed to helping them continue forward. In addition

to his work at the school, Olu spends time in rural Liberia working with the pastors and leaders to get them involved in rebuilding their communities and their country. He believes that leadership with integrity is important. He offers that kind of leadership as well as teaching others to lead.

Olu says, "I keep asking myself . . . what is the essence of being here? Is it more helpful being here than in the States? It's not an easy walk. But I am reaching more people here. It's a calling to come and change society." Olu keeps going because he finds hope in any transformation or change, no matter how small, in the lives of the students and the school.

Olu Menjay is a Baptist hero. His Baptist background has taught him the freedom to be his own person and to follow the direction that God has led him. His Baptist faith gave him the sense of assurance that he is somebody and that he could be free in the midst of all of the things that were happening to him. Olu is a Baptist hero because he has listened to God's calling to do God's work in his part of the world, and he paints a portrait of hope in Liberia!

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STORIES OF BAPTIST HEROES

Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.