

Princess Aghayere Shares Her Love of Basketball to Inspire Young West African Women

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Princess Aghayere has been called the “silent weapon” on the University of Pennsylvania women’s basketball team. In her position as forward, she had a great season this year, which happened to be her final year as a college senior. Aghayere, who lived in Nigeria, Africa, until she was 10, discovered basketball when she moved to the U.S. A shy child, she grew to develop a voice and strong leadership qualities through her years on the court.

She is now using the sport that has given her so much to make a difference in the world. Rebound Liberia, an initiative that she co-founded with her friend and Penn classmate, Summer Kollie, is working to empower young women in West Africa through basketball. KWHS interviewer Emmie Stratakis sat down recently with Aghayere, who just won the Penn President’s Engagement Prize for Rebound Liberia, to discuss the organization’s mission and vision.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Hey everyone, welcome back. We’re here with Princess Aghayere. Her project, Rebound Liberia, which she founded with two other Penn students, is using basketball to empower young women in her native West Africa. As winners of the President’s Engagement Prize, Princess and her two co-founders will be spending time developing their project after they graduate, and creating a positive change in this area of the world. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Princess Aghayere: Thank you for having me.

KWHS: Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and help us understand the history and political climate of West Africa?

Aghayere: I am originally from Nigeria. My family came here when I was eight, and I began playing basketball when I was around 10. But I partnered with my friend, Summer Kollie, she is from Liberia, and we decided to do the project in Liberia.

Liberia is an interesting country because it is one of those few countries that has never been colonized. And it has been through a lot. It’s been through a lot of hardships. They have had two civil wars, and the Ebola epidemic in 2014. But they have been able to rise from that and grow every day and develop. So going back as a junior, we really saw how far Liberia has come. And we see the potential of where it could be as well. And so we are just trying to do the little bit that we can to help out.

KWHS: Creating a social impact project is not a conventional career move. Could you talk a little bit about taking such an alternative path?

Aghayere: I am a public-health major here at Penn. But I have always wanted to help, and to go back to Nigeria at some

point. And my brother has been a key part of that. He's always told me to follow my passion as opposed to wanting to do a conventional path for security reasons, or whatever type of reasons. So it has always been following my passion, and I am so glad that has led me to where I am today. I really do feel like I am doing what I want to do. And that, I think, is the best thing.

KWHS: Describe Rebound Liberia and how you think it will benefit West Africa.

Aghayere: Rebound Liberia is an interesting program. There are a couple of programs that we have modeled it off of, but it has three major components. It has the workshop component, which includes literacy and personal-development workshops. We focused on literacy because there is a huge literacy gap between males and females in Liberia, and so we wanted to improve that. The program is specifically for women. The personal-development workshops are focused on challenges that adolescent females face, whether that is accessing new opportunities or sexual reproductive health.

The second component is the basketball piece, which we will use as a tool of learning. You know, to draw them in and keep them interested.

And then the third component is the resource center. And at the resource center, they will be able to access books, use the internet, and interact with different people in the same space. We think that this program is going to be great, because we want to be able to empower women to be leaders in their community. That is the ultimate mission and the goal.

“I see Rebound Liberia growing to be a great program, to be successful, to be sustainable, and to be able to be replicated in other places around the world.” — Princess Aghayere

KWHS: What inspired this idea, and why do you think that sports is a powerful engagement tool?

Aghayere: What inspired the idea is just my experience with sports. Sports has enabled me to hone in on my own leadership skills, and learn a lot of things, a lot of intangible things — discipline, teamwork, collaboration skills. And so those are the types of skills that I think sports can do across the board and across the world. Sports are a powerful engagement tool because they're a powerful learning tool.

Learning is more effective when you are doing it in a collaborative setting. No one likes to learn alone. And so sports in that way, especially basketball, is a sport that you have to do with other people. If you are interacting with these different people and you are learning with these different people, I think learning is a lot more fun.

It's not just: here's a book, read it. You meet these girls, you interact with them, you want to see them improve. You want to improve yourself. And so by working together, you guys are learning new things and becoming better thinkers.

KWHS: Why is making a strong social impact so important to you? Do you think it is something that other people should definitely consider?

Aghayere: Making an impact is important to me because that is where my family is from, that is home to me. And so for me to see these things on the media about Liberia, or about Africa as a whole, it pains me a little bit. I know that there is so much potential there, there are so many resources there, there is so much talent there.

I want to be a part of that generation that makes that happen for us. I want to see us rise and I want to see us develop. And I think that is definitely something that other people should do. Definitely don't give up, and don't read into these stereotypes. I think that if this newer generation really invests in our country, the sky is the limit for us.

KWHS: What is your ultimate goal in growing Rebound Liberia, and how do you see it affecting those who participate and the country that it is located in?

Aghayere: I see Rebound Liberia growing to be a great program, to be successful, to be sustainable, and to be able to be replicated in other places around the world. I really want to build this program to recruit the best talent across West Africa. And I think that as we are seeing now with NBA [National Basketball Association] players coming from different parts of the world, there is a lot of talent everywhere, but it is just about honing in on that talent, crafting it, and really investing in it.

So that is what I want to see our girls be able to do. I want to see our girls be able to play in other places. We definitely can't promise them that they will get a scholarship, or that they will be able to travel outside of Liberia, but we can give them the resources to access their own opportunities with whatever is presented in front of them. And if that is becoming an entrepreneur, then I think that is success.

KWHS: Thank you so much Princess. Best of luck in the future, and congratulations again on winning the President's Engagement Prize.

Aghayere: Thank you so much for having me.