



# DIALOGUE FOR *Change*

By Sarah Muench

**Anne Bennett '78** was driving home from work one evening, when she pulled over to the side of the road and turned up the radio. Her team was reporting on Jewel Taylor's plea for forgiveness for the war crimes her husband, former Liberian president Charles Taylor, committed in Sierra Leone.



As the country representative for Fondation Hironnelle, a nonprofit that advances the right to information through journalism, Bennett had to pause and take it in: Taylor's groundbreaking apology would be heard across the nation.

Bennett, who led the teams that created Sierra Leone's first independent, national news service, worked to ensure the post-conflict country had access to news and information to make informed decisions and contribute to a peaceful future.

"It's not about you," Bennett said. "But you can't help but be inspired by it—to live your life in a way so that you do have agency—and the courage to make decisions ... and even make the wrong decisions and deal with it."

From her days at Branson to living in Africa, Bennett has fought for what she believes in because "it was the right thing to do," she said.

Later in her career, she said, courage came from her staff and the stories of people on whom they reported.

Bennett's teams in Africa and Southeast Asia—responsible for implementing avenues of information access such as radio stations and public-service media networks—provided an outlet to tackle some of the countries' most difficult issues, such as early marriage, intimate partner violence, and violent extremism.

Some issues, like female genital mutilation (FGM), were too taboo to discuss on the radio. But many of the women with whom Bennett worked, including radio reporters, had been harmed by FGM. When they were younger, no one would talk about it.

The radio provided an avenue to discuss it, but how could they approach such a forbidden topic?

"Journalists realized there was a real danger or fear of covering FGM, but if it was going to change, there has to be a dialogue," said Bennett, a mother of two daughters.

The reporters interviewed public health experts and religious leaders to dispel myths and opened a dialogue on the airwaves so listeners could relate, gain knowledge, and begin to work through trauma.

"They could have said it was too dangerous. But when they started covering it, they heard someone call in and got such a positive reaction," Bennett said. "Women who had traumatic experiences and could talk about it and

acknowledge how harmful it is for themselves; they were doing the right thing in covering it."

Bennett always was clear about wanting to do something purposeful in life, according to Kim Belshe '78, Bennett's Branson classmate, friend and previous Secretary of Health and Human Services for former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"We are driven by wanting to make a contribution, and she executed it on a scale of international development," Belshe said. "She chose to pursue that life of purpose at a scale that is really, really impressive, and I'm terrifically proud of her as a friend and classmate."

Taking a job on the ground and moving to a new, post-conflict country involves stepping into the unknown and having confidence in yourself, Bennett said.

"Sometimes I feel you have to run toward your fear—you will see it's not so bad, going toward the scary thing and having confidence," Bennett said. "It's the small courage, not with the capital 'C.'"

But Edward Kargbo, who worked with Bennett at Cotton Tree News (CTN) in Sierra Leone and in Sudan at Radio Miraya, said it still took "an incredible amount of courage to start up a project of CTN's nature and scale in a country that was barely coming out of a long civil war, a broken bureaucracy and systems, and many other difficulties. Anne was always very calm."

Bennett used her courage, values, and experience when she stepped into her current work with think-do tank DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, which builds and strengthens accountability at state and community levels. As the head of the Sub-Saharan Africa Division, Bennett is responsible for initiatives supporting democratic governance, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

"This gave me a chance to really be involved in many more aspects of what makes up a just society and to see if I could support work that could have an impact on a larger scale," Bennett said.

Belshe said Bennett's story is about experiential learning.

"It's through experience that you learn so much about yourself," Belshe said. "I have always been impressed by Anne's commitment and passion to make a difference and her ability to face uncertainty undaunted. Courage is about facing uncertainty undaunted." ■