



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

In Liberia, Apala Barclay's comics reflected societal concerns during a civil war that left more than 200,000 dead. Here he shows examples of his recent work. Today he finds humor in the nuances of American culture.

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To explain "acquired immune deficiency" for an AIDS pamphlet, he says he drew an image of a boy taking an umbrella from a girl. He had "acquired" it. Then he puts it over his head. He was "immune" from the rain.

His pamphlets were widely distributed, drawing the attention of newspaper editors, and the First National Poll asked him to come on as its cartoonist. The publication was funded with a grant from United States National Endowment for Democracy and sought to promote free elections.

He says the paper would poll the public, asking questions such as, "Who do you want to be the next president?" Or, "Do you think you can forgive somebody during the war who killed your parents?"

"You know, all these different questions that were affecting the fabric of the Liberian society at that time," he says. He would find ways of illustrating poll results as well as creating political cartoons.

Early on in the civil war, while Taylor's forces fought with other political factions for power, Amos Sawyer sat as interim president.

When Sawyer sought to cripple Taylor's forces by changing the national currency, Apala drew the two in a boxing ring, with Sawyer punching Taylor with what he called the "monetary blow."

Apala's recurring back-page comic in the First National Poll, "Real People, Real Stories," gained popularity for its humor and stories about regular Liberians.

It wasn't long before he was creating cartoons for the National Chronicle and Sports Chronicle as well.

For several years during the conflict, Apala also volunteered at a suburban medical clinic alongside his aunt, who was

the nursing director at a hospital in Monrovia. He quickly learned how to stitch up battle wounds one day when he was alone at the clinic and a man whose hand was barely attached to his wrist walked in — he'd had a run in with a machete. The man's brother told Apala that if he didn't reattach the hand, he would be killed. "I was too scared to ask how he did it," says Apala, but he managed to clean it and suture it together. He says as far as he knows, "it still works."



In December 1994, Apala led a photographer and editorial assistant from National Chronicle into the Cow Field Massacre on Duport Road, where Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia had murdered 48 civilians, including children.

"The soldiers, you could almost see death in these guys eyes," says Apala. "They allow us to go in, we see dead bodies burned. We see all these gruesome things."

He found an elderly man hiding in a vacated building. "We with the U.N. — the press," Apala told him. Shooting resumed and he led the frightened man to a trench where they hid for three days.

When they returned to the newspaper, they had everything they needed to report on the massacre. "We had all these fresh, live pictures," he says. "The story came out, and I think Charles Taylor didn't like it, and I was somewhat a marked person for some time."

Throughout the civil war, Apala would stay with distant family members whenever police or rebels were looking for him.

During those times, he says, a member of the press would bring him assignments, and he'd do the work from his satellite location.

His family urged him to stop drawing cartoons and working for newspapers because they worried for his safety, but he says at the time he felt very strongly about spreading the message of democracy — and he was angry. "I was angry at the situation, at myself, I just wanted to see peace and people treated better," he says.

One day on his way to the National Chronicle to layout the newspaper, he was stopped and arrested by the police director's bodyguard.

"He didn't have any reason, and so I said, 'What's my charge?' He opened my wallet and he saw condoms, and he said 'I'm arresting you for illegal possession of condoms,'" Apala says.

He paid a \$20 bribe to go free, but took down the officer's badge number and the names of witnesses. Once he reached the office, he wrote an article about his false arrest for publication in the newspaper.

The following Monday when he arrived at work, his coworkers warned him that police were upstairs looking for him and the editor. "I said OK, and I was gone," says Apala. He found out later the police intended to flog him.

"Growing up, I seen all kinds of people being flogged," he says. "That's why it cut their lives short — they would beat these people. My friends say, 'The press union will come in, and international press will say this,' and I said, 'Look — I'll be dead and bruised up before these people come for me!'"

Despite the threat of arrest or flogging, Apala continued his work.

"When he wants something he goes for it," says Zulo, "No matter what obstacle or hardship, and sometimes I was afraid for him because of that, but he kept his sanity and we went through whatever struggle we went through and we made it out."

Apala never stood solidly on one side or the other throughout the war, however he had come to hate many of Taylor's tactics — such as his notorious brigade of child soldiers who were often drugged and abused.

It's estimated that between 40,000 and 60,000 children worked in Taylor's army during the civil war, according to Human Rights Watch reports.

In 1999, the height of fighting had subsided, but Liberia remained unstable. A prominent military leader approached Apala, who had done some work for the officer in the past, like painting military vehicles with wartime phrases. But this time he wanted Apala to help train Taylor's army of child soldiers. "He was a bad guy," says Apala of the official, "I tried to stay away from him."

Because Apala still has family living in Liberia, he's asked that the officer remain unnamed for this story.

Apala eluded him successfully, but knew he was growing tired of the runaround. Apala suspected it was only a matter of time before he would be targeted once again.

Then he received a scholarship to study art in Paris.

"Saturday I left Liberia," he says. "That Sunday, his boys went and surrounded the house in the morning looking for me."

En route to France, he flew to Baltimore to visit his sister, who'd already fled Liberia. But he never made it to Paris — fighting in Liberia escalated soon after he arrived in the U.S., and fearing the war would jeopardize his scholarship funds leaving him stranded in Europe, he decided to stay in the U.S.

He traveled from Baltimore to New York, then to Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan.

"I was just checking things out. I went to D.C. — stayed there with all the Liberian people. I knew I didn't want to be in Liberia in America, so there was no way I was staying in the D.C. or Baltimore area — no way."

In 2005 he moved to Portland. "It's rainy, just like Paynesville," he says.

Although it's been 16 years since he left Liberia, Apala remains cautious, asking that Street Roots not disclose the neighborhood he lives in or the names of his wife and daughter. He says he's willing to stand behind his words but doesn't want to put anyone else in danger.

Living in Liberia taught him to be grateful for what he has today — but also that "nothing is promised," he says.

"One minute my family had things, the next minute we were at the bottom. It prepared me to come to this country and work from nothing to where I am at today."

He worked in construction for a while, then as a custodian. Today he works as a medical assistant in downtown Portland, where he helps low-income and homeless patients at Central City Concern's Old Town Clinic. Formal training at the clinic allowed him to build upon the skills he acquired while volunteering at the medical clinic outside of Monrovia.

At home with his wife, Apala has his hands full with his first child, a baby girl. But when he finds the time, he can be found in his basement drawing comics and cartoons.

Editor's note: Check future issues of Street Roots for cartoons by Apala Barclay.