

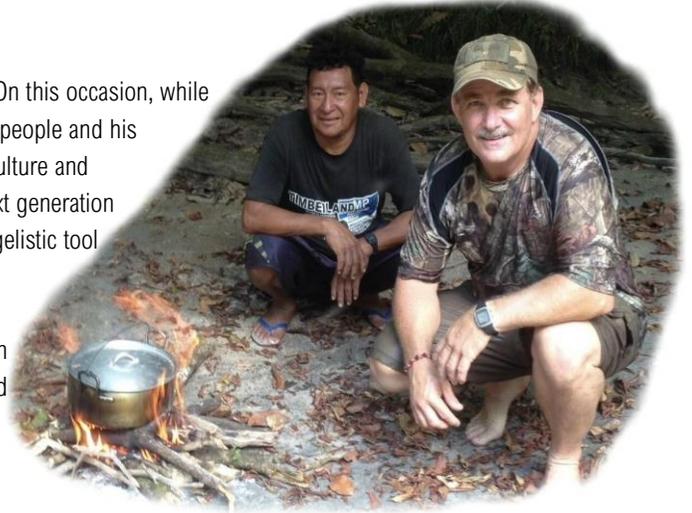
Full Circle Newsletter Volume 2 – October 2020

Dear Friends and Family,

Today I am writing with some bittersweet news about the people we are serving in Suriname. One of my best friends and ministry partners, Situnka, recently passed away from Covid-19. Sadly, the coronavirus has penetrated the jungle. Many people in the tribes are sick with the virus, and several other key church elders have also gone home with the Lord.

When I was last in Suriname in 2018, I cherished the time I had with Situnka. On this occasion, while we sat under these trees, Situnka shared his heart for the future of the Wajana people and his concern over the outside world's influences which are rapidly changing their culture and society. He acknowledged the struggle of the church leaders in helping the next generation remain strong in their faith. He saw the radio ministry as a key discipling/evangelistic tool in this process. He was eagerly casting this vision among the church leaders.

Situnka shared a story that day I had never heard before about God's protection over his life since his birth. I was two years old when my parents first contacted the Wajana people in 1961. That was the year Situnka was born. The Wajana had a practice that when a child was born, the father had to lift the child to signify that he or she could live. When Situnka was born, his grandfather, the village shaman, did not lift him. The Wajana believed that everything in nature potentially embodied evil spirits that needed to be appeased. If a mother had any difficulty during her pregnancy or delivery it was assumed that evil spirits caused it. In these cases, the baby had to die to assuage these spirits. Only the father or grandfather could choose life by picking up the baby. Situnka was left on the ground for his mother to kill. Can you imagine the heart-wrenching feelings she must have had? Yet because of this shared fear, she wrapped the baby in a blanket and took him to one of the largest rapids and laid him on a very small narrow rock. She knew that a powerful current would quickly sweep him into the river to drown. An hour or so later, she was compelled to go back to the rapids to see if the current had taken him. As she slowly approached, she could not believe what she heard! She could detect the faintest cry of her baby over the rushing sounds of the waterfall. She ran to the rock, and there she found her precious baby Sintuka still wrapped in a blanket unharmed and dry. She quickly grabbed her son and brought him back to the village despite her fear of evil spirits and what would happen when the grandfather saw him. To her, the fact that he had survived was a sign that he was meant to live.



As Sintuka shared this amazing story, it brought tears to my eyes. As a young man, I had encouraged Situnka to stay on God's path as there was a great pull on his life to follow in his grandfather's footsteps to become a shaman. We rejoiced together that day, reflecting on how the Holy Spirit had moved in his heart so that he was able to resist his family's expectations and become a key leader among his people instead. I said to Situnka, "Ahpelanma, Ipokenma man Kan. Ulë eweitop he kunehak Kan", which means in English, "this is true, God is so good. Your life is what He wanted way back then. You have been given the ear of the people." As I now reflect on this, I see a modern-day Moses story. Just as God preserved Moses in the water so he could become the leader God used to set his people free from Egyptian slavery, God preserved Situnka in the water to lead his people out of the bondage of fearing evil spirits into the freedom found in Jesus. Although Situnka did not live to see the radio ministry take off, just like Moses passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua to take the Israelites into the promised land, Situnka has now passed the radio ministry into the hands of the next generation.

I didn't know this would be my last face-to-face conversation with my friend. But I can say with confidence that like Paul in 2nd Timothy 4:6-8, Situnka finished the race set before him and remained faithful. He fought the good fight. Just as Paul had prepared others to lead, so has Situnka prepared his people. What this new generation of leaders needs now are tools like the *radio ministry* to help them disciple and evangelize their people and other indigenous people groups in nearby countries.

Right now, the Wajana people are facing more challenges than ever:

Western influence:

The culture is rapidly changing as Western society infringes on the people. Tourism, employment in the mining and lumber industry, humanitarian and conservation organizations, and even missionaries all share in bringing about this change. While the villages do not have roads or electrical power, the government has provided solar-powered internet to some of the larger villages. Social media is now available. The internet can be a tremendous learning tool; however, it can also open an entire world of negative influences.

Suicide:

There are high rates of suicide, particularly among the younger generation. Many have a sense of hopelessness about their future as they struggle to find their purpose. Like us, they desire education, jobs, and access to goods and services—none of which can be easily attained.

Environmental threats:

The people are being forced to disperse into more remote jungle regions due to significant food shortages from excessive rain/flooding and over-harvesting wild game. Illegal mining on their land using mercury has poisoned much of the river, so they no longer have pure water. To compound this issue, COVID has made it difficult for the government to fly in food and other critical supplies. Likewise, they cannot travel by canoe into other parts of the country to get these goods.

Education and abuse:

As the people have dispersed into more remote regions, education is less accessible. In the past, literacy was 100% as there were teachers in the large villages. For those that do receive an education, it only goes through middle school. To extend their education they must go to the city for high school. Sadly, they are placed in homes where some experience abuse. Young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, which again contributes to the high rate of suicide.

The church leaders recognize the biggest challenge they are facing is strengthening and equipping the church as they face these many challenges. There are few tools to help disciple the people. Now with the loss of some of the great church leaders to COVID, it is more important than ever to launch the radio ministry. God is hearing the prayers of his children. Not only is *Trans World Radio (TWR)* partnering with us to begin this ministry, but we have extended that partnership to include *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee (TTB)*. TTB has a radio teaching program that systematically walks listeners through the Bible chapter-by-chapter. The teaching is from Dr. J. Vernon McGee and has been translated and broadcasted in over 100 languages throughout 160 countries. I will be translating Dr. McGee's series into Wajana. Two other indigenous leaders will translate these teachings into Trio and Wai Wai. This will provide weekly broadcasts of doctrinally sound discipleship training for the people no matter where they travel in the interior. If you would like to learn more about the ministry of TTB, please click on this link: <https://www.ttb.org/>

Since the village I grew up in, Apetina, has internet access, Junine and I were able to read many of Situnka's family's Facebook posts following his death. As I translated the captions, the overriding message shared is their desire to follow in the instructions of God's Word.

Situnka's grandson posted a touching message in Wajana showing a picture of him rededicating his life to God while grieving his grandfather's loss. His prayer in English says: "Now Father you know our deep and innermost weaknesses. Therefore, Father help make us strong in the goodness of your name. Father, we are in the place of crying here on the earth. We are weak because we are only human...Today Your son, the one who served with you here is very happy as he is with you in your village...He went on before us to be with you...He no longer will cry, no longer weep or get sick. This is very good Father. This I pray to you in your Son's name, Jesus, AMEN."



As the people grieve the loss of Situnka, their hearts are turning toward God and all this great patriarch taught them. They are expressing their desire to recommit their lives to Jesus. But they need spiritual help, and their cry is urgent. Their tools for growing in the Lord are limited. The radio ministry will meet this need as it will provide discipleship training, tools for evangelism, worship music, and even education in times of crisis like this pandemic or when there is political unrest. With the radio, they can stay connected wherever they may need to travel. *Situnka was not only a tremendous student of the Word but was the most prolific songwriter among the people.* His love for music has been embraced by them. Many will "find purpose" as they create music and other content for the radio.

As you can see, it's more important than ever to get this ministry up and running to train the next generation. Will you help us? "The enemy comes to kill, steal and destroy." (John 10:10) COVID might have been in Satan's arsenal to cause regression in the church, but as Jesus said to his disciples, "upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:18) On the contrary, the Wajana's passion has been reignited, and we are asking that you consider becoming a part of growing the church in Suriname through your support and prayers.

Even during this global pandemic, God is moving this ministry forward. I have already begun to translate the TTB material mentioned above from my home in CA. I am working closely with TWR staff on this project. I am also able to connect with the Wajana leaders using WhatsApp. They will help me refine the material before it airs, which will also provide an income for the people.

I am so grateful to have already secured 55% of the funding needed to return to Suriname. We know that times are hard for everyone right now, but if you are able, would you consider partnering with us to get the other 45%? I am still working full-time at Ralphs and cannot start with TWR full-time until we have raised 100% of our support. We would be blessed if you would become a monthly partner or send a one-time gift to our Ministry Fund. If you are not able to give, please know that your prayer support is greatly appreciated. Our main prayer requests are:

- The Wajana as they grieve the loss of Situnka and others that have died. Pray for healing for those presently sick with COVID and protection from the virus.
- An end to the pandemic so we can freely travel to and within Suriname.
- God will raise up leaders among the younger generation of believers to launch and maintain the radio program with us.
- Our full support will come in quickly
- Junine's health - that she will remain cancer-free. Other chronic health issues have surfaced since treatment, and we ask for your prayers for healing.
- For our young adult children: Hope and our son-in-law Casey – God's continued direction in their lives as they pursue a career in music and film. Healing for Casey from a rare neurological disorder that causes severe dizziness and nausea 24/7. Josiah and Gabriella are unemployed due to COVID and live at home. Please pray for God's direction in their lives. Jaclyne, our youngest, has just started Bible college and is living at school. Pray for her protection and spiritual growth

To donate or learn more, click the link below:

<https://www.twr.org/americas/staff/thomas-schoen/> or mail your gifts to: TWR USA: P.O. Box 8700, Cary, NC, 27512-8700 (please note: Suriname project in the memo)

We are praying for God's hand of protection and provision in your lives. Please let us know how we can specifically pray for you.

Serving with you,

Tom and Junine

Tom and Junine Schoen

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