WHEN CHARLOTTE HULME ‘14 ARRIVED in Sierra Leone last summer to volunteer at Magbenteh Community Hospital, she hoped merely to find some small way to be useful—or at least to not get in the way too much. Then she met a 15-year-old named Abdulai who had lost his arm as a result of an injury and subsequent poor medical care. She called her parents, and together they provided $150—the total cost for a patient to receive a prosthetic limb in Sierra Leone. “It was the best $150 we ever spent,” Hulme says, recalling Abdulai’s joyful smile in a picture taken after his procedure.

The success of this simple act helped Hulme feel that “I’m doing the best I can, and just doing what I can do.” She cherished that feeling as “a valuable gift”—one that she was certain others would want to share.

Inspired by this experience, Hulme returned to the US and founded Arms Around Sierra Leone, a program to provide prosthetic limbs to the staggering number of Sierra Leoneans who’ve lost limbs through poor medical care, like Abdulai, or through mutilation and amputation during the civil war that devastated Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002. Hulme started raising money from family and friends in her hometown of Alma, Mich. Arms Around Sierra Leone, or AASL, has raised $5,300 to date, enough for 35 people to receive new limbs.

The trip to Magbenteh Hospital was organized by Alma College, where Hulme’s father is a professor, and Hulme primarily volunteered in the feeding and stabilization center for malnourished children. The political-science major also found time to engage in research, interviewing 120 people at the hospital—staff, young mothers, and patients—to understand what Sierra Leoneans knew about the Special Court for Sierra Leone, established to try the worst of the civil-war criminals, and whether they thought the court was effective.

Assistant Professor Stacie Goddard, who oversaw Hulme’s independent study on the subject when she returned to Wellesley last fall, noted that Hulme was posing “a research question of incredible significance—post-conflict courts are often considered key to conflict resolution efforts. . . . This was absolutely new data she was collecting, and a real contribution to the field.” Hulme has already presented some of her findings at the Universal Human Rights Conference in Washington, D.C., and at the Midwest Political Science Association Conference in April.

In the meantime, AASL has provided prosthetic limbs for 13 individuals. The Magbenteh Hospital coordinates the process, bringing patients in groups to Freetown to receive their limbs and ensuring that each individual takes a “before” and “after” picture for AASL donors to enjoy. AASL is not a registered nonprofit yet (Hulme has plans for this someday), so donations are accepted through Footprints Missions, an Alma-based nonprofit that supports the Magbenteh Hospital.

Hulme hopes to return to Sierra Leone for further research and to expand her independent study into a senior thesis. She’s also developed a strong interest in international development law, a field she expects to learn more about through an internship at the State Department this summer. And of course, she will continue striving to generate interest in and support for AASL. “We just want people to be aware that there is this place and this is what people are living with, and that could change how people see their own world.”

—EJ