





## MERCY SHIPS - Sierra Leone

### Henry Conteh



Until he was 11 years old, Henry Conteh had never gone to school. A childhood bout with polio left Henry unable to use his legs, and so it was impossible for him to travel the mile and a half to reach school. It also cost money to attend school, and Henry's parents didn't have much; like many parents in Sierra Leone, they chose not to invest in the education of their disabled child. The common perception equates a physical disability with a mental one.

So while his friends went to school, Henry stayed back and learned how to repair radios. But when his friends came home each afternoon, Henry would sit with them while they studied. He asked them questions and tried to glean from all they had learned that day in school. In this way, Henry taught himself to read. When Henry turned 11, he moved to Waterloo to live with his uncle and learn blacksmithing. His parents, sisters, and brother stayed in the village, a two-hour drive from his new home. Soon after he arrived, a friend took Henry by the nearby primary school. The head teacher saw him and asked if he attended school. When Henry told her he didn't, she ordered him to come back the next day with a parent or guardian. That next day, Henry registered for school. The next week, he found himself in a classroom full of firstyear students (5 and 6 years old).

The teacher was so impressed with Henry's school ability that she promoted him to Class Two after just one week. One term later he was promoted again. And so he sped through the first two years of primary school in just a few months. Henry received a wheelchair from Mercy Ships New Steps which helped him get around. New Steps also carried out structural modifications on Henry's school, adding ramps and a toilet facility to make it more accessible for Henry's new wheels. Now sixteen years old, Henry just finished primary school. On the National Primary Certificate Exam, he received the highest mark of anyone in his school! He is preparing to go on to secondary school this fall, but it will be farther away from his home. **Mercy Ships provided him with a Personal Energy Transportation device, or PET, which is better for covering longer distances.** He has used it for one week now and finds it very easy to ride. He worries a little about how he will get inside the classrooms at his new school without ramps, but trusts that his best friends Kamanda and Suleh will assist him when he needs help.

