

DOCUMENTARY

West Virginia Princess

IT'S SOMETHING THAT every little girl fantasizes about ... that the phone will ring and the voice on the other end of the line will tell her she's not the lonely, gawky girl that she thought she was. No, she is, in fact, a princess.

And that's exactly what happened to Sarah Culberson. At the age of 28, Culberson—who had been adopted by a family in West Virginia when she was a baby—hired a private

investigator to find her biological father. (Her mother, she had been informed a few years earlier, had died of breast cancer.) The news the investigator yielded was surprising: her father was a member of the ruling family of the Mende tribe in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. She was, by birthright, a princess. "I just

about fell off my seat," says Culberson. "I mean, a princess. To be totally honest, it was really cool." But she quickly discovered it wasn't all diamonds, castles and princes. When she arrived in her father's village, Bumpene (accompanied by a filmmaker friend), she found that the place had been nearly decimated by the country's 11-year civil war. One of her aunts had been killed by rebels; another bore scars from being slashed in the neck with a machete. Most people lived in poverty and the village's school, where her father was headmaster, was in danger of closing.

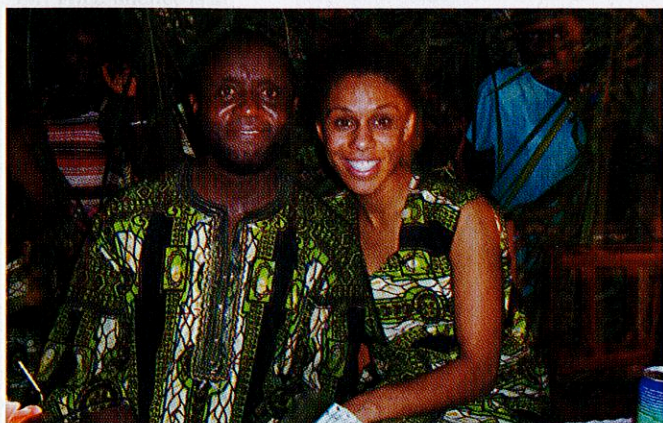
When she returned to the States, Culberson established a foundation to raise funds to save her dad's school; her goal is to have it completely rebuilt by fall 2007. Her friend has turned her quest into a feature-length documentary, "Bumpenya," which is still in production and which Culberson hopes will raise awareness for her cause. "My life and my priorities have completely changed," says Culberson. "I don't get upset at silly things anymore. My purpose now is to rebuild the school and bring peace to the people of Sierra Leone." Or, in other words, to let them all live happily ever after. —ELISE SOUKUP



ROYAL WELCOME: In Bumpene (above) and with her dad (below)

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Watch a video preview of the upcoming "Bumpenya" at xtra.Newsweek.com on MSNBC.



BELIEFWATCH 12/21/12



SAVE THE DATE: The Mayan calendar ends (and rebegins) in 2012

Followers of New Age spirituality have long turned to indigenous religions for wisdom and inspiration, so it has not escaped their notice that something big happens in 2012: the ancient and complex Mayan calendar—studied by astrology, spirituality and history buffs alike—has chugged along for 1,872,000 days, and its cycle stops (and restarts) on Dec. 21, 2012.

Speculation over the 2012 cycle change has spurred a growing cottage industry. Amazon.com shows more than 100 books on the subject, with titles like "Doomsday 2012" and "2012: You Have a Choice!" A number of spirituality conferences are already convening. This month in New Mexico, spiritual seekers will gather for a "2012 Ascension Symposium," which promises to "offer humanity global reassurance and change the Consciousness of the world"; metaphysics author Geoff Stray is giving a series of lectures on 2012 throughout 2006 and 2007, including at the UFO Conference in Nevada in February and a "Healing Conference" in Jericho, Israel, in May.

To add to the frenzy, it just so happens that the years building up to 2012 mark an unusual astronomical alignment, one so rare it occurs only in 30 out of every 26,000 years.

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During this period, the Sun will make its annual crossing of the galactic equator—the plane that bisects the Milky Way as it appears in the sky—on the same day as the winter solstice. So what does all this mean? A small group of doomsayers believe a life-ending cataclysm is on the horizon. Patrick Geryl, a Belgian researcher, says he believes the alignment will trigger a reversal in the magnetic fields of the Sun, causing it to get 10 or 20 times hotter, which will reverse the Earth's rotation on its axis and flood its inhabitants (mainstream astronomers don't agree).

Meso-American scholars are far less concerned. In Mayan cosmology, time proceeds in cycles—not in a straight line. "The world collapses, but then it gets reborn," says David Carrasco, professor of Latin American religions at Harvard University. (The Maya believe the same thing happens when the Sun rises and sets each day.) Literary-magazine editor Daniel Pinchbeck, author of "2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl," sees the new cycle as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. Instead of looking at the completion of the 5,125-year cycle as "the end," Pinchbeck suggests that 2012 "could be more like the birth of the world." —HOLLY LEBOWITZ ROSSI

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