

Sefakor's Dream

In my language, there is a saying: *Ne anyigba xor dzo koa, aforvia nuto anya*. Literally this means “when the floor is hot, nobody will tell the feet,” but translates best as “sometimes you have to take a chance and jump right in.”

~ Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie

Sefakor lives in Ghana, a country in Africa. When she was a little girl, she dreamed of going to school, but Sefakor had polio as a young child. It made it hard for her to walk. Her brother went to school but children with polio or other disabilities often could not go. Every day Sefakor would watch her brother go to school and wish she could go, too.

Sefakor's mother knew how much her daughter wanted to go to school. One day she lifted Sefakor into her arms. She carried her to school and brought her up the steps to the classroom. Finally Sefakor sat with the other children. The teacher showed the children how to read and understand numbers and Sefakor was happy. Sefakor loved to learn and her mother loved Sefakor. So every day she brought Sefakor to school.

It was not easy to get around in the school. There were steps going into the school and steps in the building. When other children ran out to play, Sefakor had to stay in the classroom. The bathroom was in a separate building. The path to the building was rocky and the bathroom itself was not made for a child with physical disabilities. Sefakor had to wait till she got home or use a bucket in the schoolroom as a toilet. It was embarrassing but it did not stop Sefakor from going to school. Instead, it made Sefakor dream. Maybe someday children with disabilities would have schools without steps, and with smooth paths and bathrooms that children in wheelchairs or on crutches could use.

She learned about her country and the world. Sefakor learned at school but she also learned from her mother and her aunts and uncles. She heard the proverbs and wisdom — stories of her people — and learned from the people around her. She saw that some people with disabilities were out on the streets begging and others were hidden away. Sefakor dreamed of a day when it would be easier for all children with physical disabilities to go to school.

When Sefakor grew up, she decided to become a teacher. She got her teaching degree and began going to schools again. Many things had not changed. The school buildings were still hard for her to use, even when she used her crutches. She saw that many children with disabilities were still not going to school. Some people still felt people with disabilities brought bad luck. Others felt that children and adults with disabilities would always need to be taken care of. They did not

know that many individuals who have disabilities want to help themselves and help others.

Sefakor began to work with other people with disabilities calling for a law that would protect the rights of people with disabilities in Ghana. Meanwhile, Sefakor married. She and her husband became parents, but she never forgot her dream of schools that welcomed children with disabilities. She and others came together and looked for ways to change attitudes about people with disabilities in Ghana. They began speaking out for more rights and for Sefakor's dream of accessible schools. They went on Ghana's public television to educate others and speak about the need for changes.

In 2006 Ghana passed a national disability rights law. It says that children with disabilities have the right to attend the public schools and that it is against the law for parents to keep their children out of school. The government made funds available to start schools for children who needed special teachers or services such as sign language interpreters or braille, but it did not make money available to make the public schools more accessible. Sefakor realized that she had to keep dreaming and speaking out for change. Then one day she had an idea of how to make her dream become reality.

Sefakor realized that most of the schools in Ghana are built using the same design. They have the same entrance and classrooms. If she could create a simple way to make accessibility changes to one school, these same changes could help make all schools accessible. Sefakor decided to go to the United States to develop a workable plan to make a school accessible. It was not an easy decision. Going away to school meant finding the money to travel and pay for her college costs. It meant going to a very different place and leaving her husband and children for two years while she studied disability policy and social change. The idea was exciting and frightening at the same time.

Sefakor's dream, however, was hard to ignore. Sefakor decided to try to make it to the United States. She applied for a grant that helped pay for people to come to the United States to study. Doors opened. The funding came through and she was accepted to the program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt. Once she arrived in Vermont she started special projects with disability organizations that helped her develop her ideas to make schools accessible in Ghana.

When Sefakor was planning her trip to the United States, she thought she was coming to a place where all schools and public places would be accessible. She was surprised to see barriers like the ones she saw every day in Ghana. America had more money and fancier schools than the ones in Ghana but she still found stairs blocking the way to classrooms and other public places. People with disabilities still had to deal with discrimination and sometimes found it hard to talk openly about disability issues. She discovered that it is almost as hard to find accessible transportation in Vermont as it is in Ghana! Sefakor helped her classmates at SIT and also students at the University of Vermont understand that

a commitment to human rights in education requires a commitment to building schools and services that work for everyone.

As she met people, Sefakor explained the need for disability rights protections in Ghana and around the world. She showed them pictures of friends in Ghana who worked with her to change how people think about and treat people with disabilities. She also spoke of the need for the United States to adapt the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a treaty countries sign to recognize and protect the rights of people with disability around the world. She told people in New England and Washington, D.C., about her dream for accessible schools and learned about new approaches to design that would help her convince politicians in Ghana that there is a way to make schools in Ghana better for children with disabilities. She inspired everyone she met with her stories and her dream. Sefakor was asked to give a speech at her graduation. She spoke about the need for all the graduates to go out and change the world for the better.

When she graduated she returned home to her family with new skills, lots of donated adaptive equipment and an international network of friends and allies. She now runs an organization that helps other people with disabilities and is working on her accessible schools project. She is inspiring others to work for change, but she and her growing number of allies in Ghana and around the world still have a lot of work to do — and a dream to make real. Sefakor’s organization is called Enlightening and Empowering People with Disabilities in Africa (EEPDA). To learn more about their work, visit their website <http://www.eepdafrica.org/> or this YouTube site:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m1y6ywdggU>.