

Talking with Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie, 2013 and 2014

“We are a people who tell our values through proverb,” Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie told a disability studies class at the University of Vermont. Later, in an email from Ghana she shares her favorite proverbs, which shape her “life every day in this advocacy work.”

Asi deka mesina akpe o. — Literally it means, one hand cannot clap. Really, it means one person cannot do it. We need to have a unified voice to achieve our aims. (Community life, you know!)

Dzignbordi wokoa anyidi hafi kporna efe dorme. — Literally it means, we need extra patience to dissect an ant before you can see its intestines. The real meaning is with perseverance and patience difficulties can be overcome. I think this has been pushing me forward in my advocacy work against all odds.

Wometsoa nuku deka kpona atukpa eve me o. — Literally it means, you cannot look into a bottle with both eyes. If you try it, only your nose looks into it. The real proverbial meaning is, it does not pay to be greedy; you lose in the long run.

Sefakor also replied to questions that the instructor asked via email.

Question

I would love students to have a sense of who you are and what it is like living in Ghana, both during your childhood and today. Can you tell me about growing up: What was your childhood like? Are there things you remember that you want to share?

Answer

My life has gone through so many metamorphoses from childhood up till now. One major thing that I recollect vividly is how my Mum used to carry me and cried on me. It has been an indelible mark left in my memory since my father neglected us from the very day that polio affected me. Life was quite unbearable for the poor woman to take care of me (the first born) single-handedly without the love of a father. Among other things, my Mum still saw good things in me and sent me to school in order to develop my skills and talents. She used to carry me on her back to school but later when I was growing, I was carried by the bicycle, motor [car] and a truck respectively at different stages. With the help of the Almighty God, we sailed through successfully. Here I am today, a professional French and English teacher and pursuing my master’s degree to be a policy analyst and advocate, despite all odds.

Question

What would you like to share about your family and your life today?

Answer

I came from a very large and loving family. I can attest today that, without my family members (extended family) I wouldn't have reached this pinnacle of life. My Mum is the last born of 10 children while my father is the first of 12 children. Despite the neglect from my father, some of my aunties, uncles, and grandparents were there for us to lean on. My grand-mum (my Mum's) was always around taking care of me as my Mum was working assiduously to get the resources needed to keep me at school and in the community. Life was indeed, very communal as I grew up in a very reputable family well-known to be a Christian home.

Question

How did your disability happen and how did your family and community respond to your disability?

Answer

I was not like this until polio affected my left leg during my childhood. I went back to sitting, crawling, toddling, etc. So in the past, I used to limp on one (the left) leg without any aid. I moved from that level of limping to using a caliper (brace) and a pair of crutches. My disability became more complex as I am growing older. Due to lack of accessible school buildings, I had a fall in 2006 during my first degree, from while going to a lecture. My right knee cap (the then strong leg) shifted during the fall and that has affected me very badly. Now I cannot stand up for long. Though this right leg needs an operation, I don't have that type of money now. I use a wheelchair or a scooter depending upon where I am going.

Question

How did you get interested in working as a teacher? What would you most like to tell teachers in America about education in Ghana?

Answer

I love talking and imparting knowledge. I love sharing, discussing, mentoring and leading the way for somebody to follow. Since my childhood, my friends made me know that if I am not present, nothing gets done — hence my interest to be a teacher.

I guess teachers in America should leave their comfort zones and explore more possible ways to be part of the campaign for inclusive design. Education in Ghana isn't that easy but we (PWDs) are struggling to change the status quo.

Question

Tell me about some of your advocacy work for people with disabilities in Ghana. What made you decide to advocate for change? What drives your work today? Why is it so important that women with disabilities organize and speak out?

Answer

Just as in America some years ago or even presently, the struggle for women's voices to be heard is not over; the same thing applies to Ghanaian women with disabilities. We want to be ourselves, have equal opportunity — with justice, with dignity — and we want to have our independence.

Question

Can you tell us about your campaign for accessible schools? Who are your partners and what do you hope to accomplish in the next two or three years?

Answer

Hmmmm, my campaign for accessible schools is all about total inclusion in our schools in Ghana. Based on my experiences with the educational system till now, I realized somebody has to do something and that person is me. I wrote a Policy Brief during my class work at the School for International Training, which I now use in Ghana, both on television and in other work to move forward these recommendations. From these campaigns, some like-minded organizations and individuals have come on board. A typical example is the Wawa Project, which has agreed to retrofit a school building in my municipality to be accessible. In this school, there are five physically disabled students. After the retrofitting, this school will be used in our subsequent campaigns (the school before and the school after) for more campaigns to hold the government accountable.

Question

I know you have been active in advocacy to get the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) passed. Why is this so important?

Answer

Yes, indeed, I was very instrumental in the ratification of CRPD in Ghana and to support its passage in the USA as well because it means a lot to all PWDs. Though we have not achieved our goal in the USA, I hope they will come to a consensus and ratify this as early as possible. This is a universal tool. It does not impose rights. It is a voluntary tool to agree to move forward, to accept responsibility to fulfill certain obligations.

Question

What are your impressions of the United States? What are the opportunities and challenges you see for children and adults with disabilities in Ghana and in the United States? From your perspective, what can we learn from each other?

Answer

Though we are perceived to be in the developing world, therefore lack so many things in terms of development, I noticed life here in the United States isn't that much better for PWDs than it is for us in Ghana. PWDs here still struggle with the authorities for the same equal rights as we do. We both have the goal to change the perceptions and attitudes of people towards PWDs.

The only difference is that the policies/laws are implemented in the US and people can be held responsible for things at times. (That is, if you know how the law works.) In Ghana there is a national disability rights law, but there are fewer rules to help enforce the law.

On the flip side, life here is more challenging (culturally) due to the notion of individualism, which is so strong in the United States.

[Note from interviewer: Sefakor often mentioned how much help the extended family gives in Ghana and how different this is from many people's experiences in the United States, where so many people and families are expected to make it on their own.]

Deborah Lisi-Baker interviewed Sefakor both in person and by email in 2013 and 2014. The information from these conversations was used to write Sefakor's Dream and was shared with the students in UVM's Culture of Disability class.