

## Emergency Response: My Faith Story

I share this story of faith with joy and gratitude to God who implant that gift (of faith) in our heart. It was an emergency response that saved life. When God intervened through us, we experienced His mighty saving help.

As a school head, I found myself acquainting myself with the story of my students not just within the classroom but way back to their homes checking on them. And so, I came to know about Ebute Stephen. Ebute Stephen was in Basic 9 when I was posted to Holy Innocents Catholic Day Secondary School in 2017. He is the youngest in his class (the final year class). He will clock 16 on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2021.

I noticed that he was never regular in school and would always be chased home for school fees. It was in his SS1 when I had to send for his parents. His mother came; a pretty young lady. She was in tears and I wondered why when I had not even said anything. I asked her to sit down and asked why her eyes were flooded.

"I thought my son fainted because he did not eat last night, and this morning, he did not eat too. I told him not to go to school but he insisted..."

"And why did he not eat?" I inquired

"Because there was no food in the house."

By her look no one would think she had nothing to eat. I felt sad and pity for her but tried to compose myself so that I don't join in the crying.

"What does your husband do? I asked next

"He is no more. He died some years back. He was one of the soldiers killed by the Boko Haram group so I am left with caring for the children."

"Ok, stop crying now. Your son did not faint. He is ok, I only called to find out why he was always chased home for fees; so now I know..."

She interrupted

"The soldiers pay the fees and they only make payment whenever we get his result and travel to Abuja to go and show them the result. That is not always easy for us as sometimes we spend much money more than the school fees and even wait for so many days in Abuja to be attended to."

That was the reality of one of the many students under our care. Having heard that story, we started giving considerations and I looked out for him to ensure he remains in the school as in this place, children can easily change school.

During the corona pandemic lockdown of 2020, Stephen's family benefitted from the three months' palliative we shared in the school.

At the end of the term in December, 2020, one of our teachers informed me that Stephen had been unwell. I asked what the problem was and was told that he had some problem with his legs and had been taken to the village for treatment. I tried to call his mother but could not get

through to her. I was later told that there was no network in that part of the village. I was hoping he would be better and would go to see him when they come back home.

In January, I asked the same teacher about Stephen she told me his condition had worsened that he could no longer walk. I was home for my mother's burial when the teacher called me that she had gone to visit Stephen and her mother and I was able to speak with Steve and promised to visit him on my return.

In keeping to my promise, it was the last week of January when I asked to be taken to the village.

And there the recount of the sorrowful mystery started:

"Oh Sister, Stephen's situation is so pathetic now. I wonder if he would make it. He can neither sit nor stand. He lays perpetually on his stomach. He is now like a skeleton. The mother does not even know what to do about the situation anymore. They just brought him back to Otukpo..." on and on she recounted.

"Well, from what you have said, I can't stand it. Maybe you go with the vice Principal, Mrs Ameh," I said.

I sent for Mrs Ameh, the Vice Principal and asked that they both go to see Stephen. Mrs Ameh encouraged me that it would be good that I go too. I then mustered courage. We went that afternoon.

All women: Sr. Beatrice, Sr. Mary, Mrs Ameh, Mrs Enah and Mrs Ezeugwu.

It was truly a pathetic sight. Stephen's legs were facing different directions and were dark! Stephen was lying on his stomach; Stephen was so pale and skeletal.

What happened to Stephen?

His mother's version was that he was probably kicked on the football field and did not want to say it but Stephen insisted that he woke up feeling pains in his leg. The mother then tried to treat him. she exhausted all she had. Since there was no improvement, his grandpa in the village asked that he should be brought to the village. There, he was taken to a local bone setter who tied his two legs for twelve days. He was warned not to untie the legs by himself that the rope would slack and would automatically the legs would be untied. But if he tried to untie himself, the process would be done all over again. He endured the pain for the twelve days and he said the bandage remained as tight as ever; he was later unbound. The resultant effect was rather a huge damage to Stephen's health as some bones around his pelvic shifted and causing him pains and total weakness in both legs. Stephen became incapacitated.

Stephen was returned to his mother. With no money for treatment together with no money for feeding, they had given up and all were waiting for his last breath.

Neighbours tried to give the little support of food they have when they were able.

We prayed with them that day and the women encouraged Stephen's mother to intensify her prayers for the life of his son and remaining children.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. ( Luke 4:18)

It is God himself who spur us to respond to Him. And our hearts were restless until we follow his commands. Going by faith and good work of James 2:14 , and also James 2:16 “Go in peace; keep warm and eat well” but then we don’t give the person any food or clothing. What good does that do? Faith must be complemented by action otherwise it is dead James 2:17. And so God stretched our faith and we sprang into action; we could not just leave the little boy having prayed for him and with him.

We visited a second time with food and we started searching for a hospital where Stephen would be attended to. Some of my sisters had worked with Lilian Fond so I made some calls describing Stephen’s health condition. They assured me that Mkar Rehabilitation hospital in Gboko, Benue State can attend to him and I was given some Doctors’ numbers. I called one of them and he said to bring him over.

The major problem of course was money. We turned to God in prayers telling Him how He has brought this let him guide us. There was a battle of using a child’s school fees that I had saved to begin Stephen’s treatment. The Spirit told me that this child is alive and healthy. The money saved is for her secondary school and she has not even finished primary six. I listened and withdrew the money and I sent Mrs Enah to Stephen’s house to tell the mother to get ready that we are going to hospital in two days’ time ( Sunday, 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2021).

I had so much fear about the whole plan. The child was in great pain; all the what “ifs” played:

What if he dies on the way to the hospital?

What if this what if that? God helped us to surmount it all.

I decided to do the driving myself knowing that going on a public transport the driver may not consider his situation to go gently and the roads are already nightmares to drive on.

A day to the journey we got a nurse to attend to him if he needed some pain relievers or whatever medications that could help him to withstand the journey.

The mother said she had no money and I told her neither do I have but let us trust God, He would provide. I told her to get ready she might be in the hospital for a month or two. We did some shopping for their feeding, fueled our car and got ready for the journey.

It was hell between the time of lifting Stephen from the sitting room to the car. He cried for pain and I got scared whether he would make it for this journey. In the fear is underlying faith and trust in God that all would be ok. We literally “crawled” to Mkar. Impatient drivers hauled abuses on me for not driving “normal” on the road. But if I were to stop and explained that I was carrying a sick child who was in excruciating pain at each roll of the tyres, it would have taken us more than two days to reach. Thankfully we arrived safely and Stephen was admitted.

I used all my whatsapp contacts to fund raise for Stephen’s health. Sr. Maria Onoja, a Spiritan Sister helped us greatly. We thank her. She raised over a hundred thousand for us. The school community raised some money too and many others.

Stephen's surgery was cost for over 500,000. The mother said he became sick when he heard of the amount; he asked where they would get such amount of money from.

Stephen had his first surgery 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 and the second 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2021.

Stephen is recovering well. It was an emergency response that brought back the life of a child.

We are happy to see him coming back to life and praying he is able to walk with his two legs again. The medical bill is yet to be completed; we are hopeful that God who has brought us this far, will see to the completion and healing of his beloved son, Stephen Ebute. Stephen is grateful and so is his mother and two sisters.

Sr. Mary Ojonugwa Unwuchola, MSHR