

Speeches

Our American Journey: Challenges, threats and opportunities*

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PREAMBLE

As someone who was not born in this country, I feel comfortable discussing this topic from a vantage position as a naturalized citizen of the United States who arrived here at the age of 25.

The first general rule of any presentation is to know the composition of your audience. Let us do a check. I am assuming that a majority of the individuals in this hall are Nigerians like me with a physical therapy degree. Lets show by raising of the hand, how many people in the hall meet these criteria?

During this presentation, I will share with you my American voyage; review the contributions of Nigerians to the economic development of America; discuss the challenges facing immigrants in America; assess the motivation for coming to America; and discuss how you can contribute to the development of physical therapy education in Nigeria. I will conclude by discussing the seven basic tenets of having a rewarding professional life.

MY AMERICAN JOURNEY

Africans arrived in the United States of America under different circumstances. Some of us arrived as willing immigrants and many arrived unwillingly through the transatlantic slave trade. Black men and women, whether they came from Saint Dominguez in 1791 or those who recently relocated from Africa, have contributed and continue to make significant

contributions to the socioeconomic fabric of American life.

I would like to share with you my own American story. My American journey has three phases to it. I usually call my voyage to America ‘missionary journey’ as a dedication to my Christian upbringing. My first ‘missionary journey’ commenced on August 12, 1980 from Idofin-Isanlu, my place of birth in Kogi State, Nigeria to Lagos where I boarded a flight to New York City en route Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I arrived in the USA, on a Federal Government of Nigeria postgraduate scholarship to study physical therapy at the University of Pittsburgh. I earned my Master’s and doctorate degrees in 1981 and 1985, respectively. Before completion of my dissertation, I was employed as assistant professor of physical therapy at Russell Sage College, NY. I worked at Russell Sage for two years (1984-1986) before returning to Nigeria. It was at OAU, Ile-Ife, that I was privileged to meet many of you who are present here this morning.

I embarked on my second ‘missionary journey’ to the USA in 1987 when I came to the University of Florida at Gainesville, as a visiting research scholar. I returned to my post in Ife after 4 months and was there until 1991.

I will be remiss if I failed to comment on my experience at Ife, since it occupied a significant component of my life story and biography. As many of you know, in 1985, the first physical therapy

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graduate programme in Nigeria was initiated at OAU. I served as the coordinator of that programme from 1986-1991. I arrived at OAU with credible academic credentials at the young age of 31, full of dreams to make contributions to the development of my country. As an idealistic but pragmatic young man, I put in my best to advance the image and status of physical therapy education in Nigeria. I always challenged my students to think critically and not consume information hook, line and sinker. I also challenged the status quo when I campaigned for and won the election to become the vice-dean of the College of Health Sciences. I served as the vice-dean from 1990-1991. Before my election, the position of vice-dean was considered the birth right of 'medics' 'i.e. our physician colleagues on the faculty. My election and performance in office changed many mindsets and opened the floodgate for other 'non-medic' colleagues to become vice-dean and later dean in the College of Health Sciences.

Today, I look back with great satisfaction on the many accomplishments and 'seeds' that I planted during my tenure at OAU. Many of the students whom I mentored at OAU have obtained their doctorates or earned advanced board certification and are doing great things in education or in clinical practice. If you are an OAU alumnus and have obtained your doctorate or earned advanced board certification, can you please stand up for recognition?

Two of my colleagues on the faculty at OAU during this period (Dr. Victor Obajuluwa and Dr. Kehinde Abereoje) are also here tonight as guest speakers. Professor Vincent Nwuga and Professor Matthew Olaogun, who are not here tonight, were also on the faculty at that time. We all worked together in shaping the future of our students and in implementing many research projects. OAU will continue to occupy a special place in my heart, because it was at OAU that I perfected the skills on how to mentor graduate students' theses. Mrs. Mabogunje, Major Ohali (retired Lt. Col.), Major Mogbo (retired Lt. Col.) and Captain Isi (retired Lt. Col.), Mr. Oyeyemi (now Dr.), Mr. Faniran, Mr. Fawole, Ms. Pungon were among the students whom I supervised or co-supervised their theses at OAU.

Most importantly, it was at Ife that I met the young woman whom I later married. It was Dr. and Mrs. Obajuluwa who provided me with the encouragement to take seriously my relationship with this young woman. The Obajuluwas' knew my wife's family. Mrs. Obajuluwa did her National Youth Service at Ikare-Akoko, working for my then to-be mother-in-law. The young Obajuluwa was then working at the General Hospital in Ikare. It was Dr. Obajuluwa who escorted me to Ikare to meet my in-laws for the first time. The Obajuluwas match-making skills should be respected, for their points-of-view were significant in my decision to marry my wife in December 1989. It was also at Ife that I gave birth to my first son, Omotade, in January 1991.

After five years at OAU, it was time to move on. I, in company of my wife and son, embarked on my third 'missionary journey' to America. We arrived at Texas Woman's University (TWU), Houston, in December of 1991 where I was employed as Associate Professor and Director of the Industrial Research laboratory. After two years at TWU it was time to move on in search of greener pastures.

I relocated to Brooklyn in 1993 to assume the position of professor and chairman of the physical therapy programme at the State University of New York (SUNY). I was promoted in 1996 to the position of associate dean for academic and students' affairs. After 6 years at SUNY Brooklyn, it was again time to move on.

In September 1999, I was appointed professor and dean of the College of Health Sciences at Chicago State University (CSU). In May 2008, I was conferred the distinguished university professor award by the university's board of trustees. At this stage, you might ask, when am I planning to 'move on'. Going by my track record, I definitely have overstayed at Chicago after almost 11 years of my employment at CSU. The truth of the matter is that I have no immediate plan to relocate from the 'windy city' which I now call 'home.'

Since arriving in the USA, I have been blessed with three additional children—Omotayo in 1993, Omotola in 1999 and Omotoluwafe in 2001. Since 1991, my family has visited Nigeria during our

vacation on several occasions. For my children, the visits have been educational and enlightening. They give them a sense of appreciation for what America has to offer.

My American story typifies the experience of many immigrants who have come to this land of opportunity called the United States of America. I am sure you all have better, interesting and compelling stories to tell about your American experience.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NIGERIANS TO AMERICA

Many Nigerians have accomplished great things in this country. Nationwide, we have ‘brothers and sisters’ who occupy positions of responsibility in the healthcare industry, academy, sports, entertainment and the corporate sectors of the economy. In the sporting arena, we have excelled in great numbers. Nigeria has produced seven prominent basketball players who have played the game at professional level: Hakeem Olajuwon (Hall of fame player), Peter Aluma, Yinka Dare, Obinna Ekezie, Julius Nwosu, Michael Olowokandi, and Olumide Oyediji.

There are 47 American football players with Nigerian roots that have played the game at professional ranks. Many of you will remember Amobi and Christian Okoye, Brendon and Obafemi Ayanbadejo, Victor Adeyanju, Adewale Ogunleye, Akbar and Kabeer Gbaja-Biamilia and Mohammed Elewonibi to mention a few. We have a ‘brother’ currently playing for the USA soccer team in the world cup. Oguchi Onyewu is the anchor of the U.S. World Cup soccer team's defence.

In the entertainment arena, only a few Nigerians have made it on national television, Hollywood or Broadway. In academy, it is still rare to find a Nigerian holding the position of university president in the United States. However, there are a few Nigerian vice-presidents or provosts and many deans.

In the corporate sector, there are several Nigerians in the banking organizations, Fortune 500 companies and Wall Street. President Obama, recently appointed Dr. Akeem Biobaku, a Nigerian barrister, to enforce the newly proposed Wall Street regulations.

In the health care sector, we have many Nigerian physicians (Dr. Godwin Onyema) and physical therapists around the country that have distinguished themselves and received national awards and have built flourishing private clinical practices.

In politics, we are still an endangered species for we have not made it past election into the office of Mayor. However, we have first generation immigrants from the other races who have made it big time in politics in this country. A few notables are: Bobby Jindal, Governor of Louisiana, Indian immigrant parents; Governor Jennifer M. Granholm of Michigan; parents from Canada; Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of California, German ancestry; and the ex-governor of my home state of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich who is the second Serbian American to be elected Governor after George Voinovich of Ohio. I mentioned these names to remind us all that it is possible to achieve the impossible if we put our mind to our goal and work hard towards it.

I would like to highlight the contributions of physical therapists in this country with Nigerian roots. A visit to the Nigeria Physiotherapy Network website (<http://www.nigeriaphysio.net/>) will provide you a detailed listing of Nigerian physical therapists who are ‘movers and shakers’ in our profession. In the academy, there are a number of us Nigerian-trained physical therapists employed in colleges and universities across the United States. Examples are: Dr. Chukuka Enwemeka, professor and dean of the College of Health Sciences at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee; Dr. Akinniran Oladehin, professor and chair, Department of Physical Therapy, Missouri State University, Springfield, MO; Dr. Victor O. Obajuluwa, professor, PTA Program, Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana; Dr. Emmanuel John, assistant professor in the Department of Physical Therapy, Howard University, Washington, DC; and Dr. Abiodun Akinwuntan, assistant professor in the Department of Physical Therapy, Medical College of Georgia, Augusta, GA.

In addition to the academy, it is gratifying to note that there are many Nigerian trained physical therapists in this country that are in clinical practice

and serve as chief executive officer/president; and they are doing very well financially.

The above achievements although laudable should not be taken for granted and we should not rest on our laurels. We have a long way to go, but we have built a strong foundation for the future. America is a nation where good ideas thrive. This nation prides itself as a laboratory for experimentation, innovation and entrepreneurship. It is a country where dreams, with dedication and hard work, can come true.

Good as all these may sound, my adopted country has not attained the 'perfect union' that our founding fathers promise. The playing field is still not completely level and Martin Luther King's vision of the 'promised land' is yet to be achieved. However, America has made great strides towards the goal of a 'perfect union'. Three years ago, it was inconceivable to think of a black man in The White House. Today, it is a reality, with the election of President Barak Obama.

The influx of Africans to the USA increased nearly sevenfold between 1960 and 1980, and more than tripled between 1980 and 2005. The Africans' share of the US Black population increased from less than 1% in the 1960s to 8% in 2005. About 17% of the growth of the US Black population in the 1990s, and 20% in 2006 are immigrants from Africa. In 2005, about 1 million of foreign-born Blacks were from Africa. This demographic shift in the USA population is a politician gold mine if properly harnessed. If Black people in this country unite, we can have a profound impact in shaping policies affecting the African continent.

Education has always been the primary reason for Nigerians coming to the United States. The educational achievement of Nigerians in the USA is remarkable. Enrollment at US Ivy League colleges and universities revealed that a disproportionate number of the Black students are foreign-born or the children of foreign-born parents. Only 13% of Blacks enrolled are first or second generation Americans while 35% are foreign-born or the children of foreign-born parents. Children of African immigrants are more likely than US born Blacks to have fathers with a college degree; a key predictor for a college

attendance, and they tend to have slightly higher SAT scores.

The increased enrollment of African immigrant children in US Ivy League colleges and universities has fuelled criticisms by some prominent African Americans such as Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, and Dr. William Gates among others. They argued that US Ivy League colleges and universities are not helping African American blacks meet the affirmative action goals meant to redress the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States.

Today, we African immigrants have among the highest percentage of college graduates of any US ethnic group. About 38% of us have a college degree. Only Asian Americans had a greater percentage of college graduates. Given the contributions that we Nigerians have made to the economic engine of this country, it is fair to ask the question; how are we perceived in America?

THREATS

In the 1980s, Nigerians in the USA are generally looked upon as trustworthy citizens. Nigerian students across the country excel academically and receive high accolades and awards for hard work. In large numbers, we earned our graduate degrees and returned home to assume coveted positions in the academy, government establishments, and in the private sector of the economy.

In the 1990s, Nigerian image took a nose dive for the worst as many of our 'brothers and sisters' were prosecuted for sophisticated white collar crimes which were prominently featured on the national news. Many were sentenced to jail for credit card and Medicare fraud, drug trade, and the 419 scam. A controversial and questionable report on CNN, in 2008, estimated that 40% of Nigerians living in the US are criminals. As a result of the CNN report and similar reports on the CBS '60 Minutes' and NBC 'Dateline' investigative news programmes, the American perception and attitudes towards Nigerians changed. The public is now generally sceptical and suspicion of Nigerians.

The unfortunate incident of December 25, 2009 in which an Al Qaeda-linked terrorist Nigerian, Umar

Farouk Abdulmutallab, 23, attempted to blow up over Detroit a Northwest Flight 253 carrying 278 passengers and 11 crew members has created a public relations nightmare for us Nigerians. The USA government immediately placed Nigeria on the 'terrorist' state list. We joined pariah states such as Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Yemen on this perilous list.

My 'brothers and sisters', I suggest that you be on your best behaviour at all times. All eyes and those hidden cameras are on you, especially at the airport. Be careful, if you have to travel to Arizona; the stakes are higher because of the recent immigration act that was signed into law by the governor of that state. Law enforcement agents in Arizona can now stop you if they have a 'probable cause' that you are an illegal alien. If you cannot produce a valid ID, you may be held indefinitely in jail. America is in a conservative mood and so 'brothers and sisters', you need to be careful and stay clear of Arizona, if possible.

Changing our 'criminal' and 'terrorist' image for the better is a gradual process that should begin with each one of us doing the right thing.

CHALLENGES FACING NIGERIANS IN AMERICA

America is a land of opportunity but you must be prepared to work hard and also pray for your 'break.' Unfortunately, many of us Nigerians in this country are not willing to work hard to achieve excellence in our professions. Quite often our country men and women are too quick to allege the 'D' (discrimination) word when denied their unrealistic expectations.

It is appropriate to remember that no nation is perfect. America is still the most welcoming nation on the planet. People's world view is shaped by their experiences. It is part of human nature to want to associate with individuals that look like them and share common interests and values. Preferential treatment is an unfortunate, but inherent behaviour of the human race. Even in less diverse nations such as Nigeria, tribalism and nepotism are very endemic.

Adjusting to a new culture away from home, is not as easy as it may sound. We Nigerians in the

United States bring a diversity of work skills and experience, along with our rich cultures and traditions. During the process of acculturation to the American way of life, we work hard at picking up a new phonation. In trying to do all that, we should never completely forget our cultural heritage. We need to impart to our children the vitality and richness of our Nigerian culture.

All immigrants, especially people of colour with foreign accents, have a steeper road to climb in the academy, corporate, and entertainment arena. Be prepared for disappointment as you chart your career trajectory. I have my own stories to tell, but this is not the place or time to go into details.

Belonging to the 'right' socioeconomic class and network loop is always beneficial. Networking is something that we Nigerians do not do very well. We excel on our individual merits, but we are often too selfish to care about our 'brothers and sisters.' This attitude has to change if we hope to make an impact in this country.

America is a melting point of many cultures, but our children face a sociological divide and intense peer pressure to conform to Eurocentric values at the expense of our Nigerian culture. Without any empirical data to support my hypothesis, I have observed that our daughters are able to successfully navigate both the Afro and Euro-centric worlds and succeed academically, but our sons are less savvy and less sophisticated.

I often challenge my social scientist colleagues to test my hypothesis and come up with pragmatic solutions to address the culture of low expectation and under performance among our Nigerian male children in the USA. The findings from such cross-cultural studies will provide us parents the needed strategies for coping with the behaviours of our sons. Until we know better, we need to stay involve in the socio-emotional development of our children.

Many of us, including yours truly, can be classified as workaholics. I would let my wife confirm or refute this. But seriously, we need to find a balance in whatever we do to make our life better and whole. We need to work smarter and not neglect our parental obligations. A year ago, I lost a very close colleague

to pancreatic cancer. Many of you in the hall may know him, Dr. Julius Afolabi. He was a lecturer in the Department of Environmental Health at OAU, from 1986 to 1991. I would like for us all to rise and remain silent for one minute in honour of this great Nigerian patriot. Dr. Afolabi's demise has given me a new lease on life and a better appreciation for living.

Nigerians in diaspora face enormous pressures to excel, but we unfortunately lack the day-to-day support of our extended families. We do not have the shoulder of our parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins to cry on. The African adage that 'it takes a village to raise a family' is not applicable to us in America because we do not realistically have the 'village' support. As a result, our children and spouses may feel neglected as we struggle to balance our work and parental responsibilities.

There is some compelling evidence that reveals that the rate of divorce in our Nigerian community is on the upswing. In general, African immigrants in America are more likely to be married and their children are more likely to live in a two-parent households than any other group of Black immigrants. The 2000 census data showed that 76% of children of African immigrants (whether born in the United States or abroad) lived in a two-parent family, compared with about 65% of Caribbean immigrant children and just 44% of African American children. However, we African immigrants are still below the 84% of children in all immigrant families who lived in a two-parent family.

The increasing rate of divorce in our community deserves special attention. Divorce is alien to our culture and we should keep it so. The trauma of the effect of family separation on the children is unimaginable and the pecuniary cost is enormous. Marriage is a sacred institution to be respected and cherished. The adage: 'It takes two to tango' is very true. For any marriage to remain viable, compromise is critical, for there is no 'perfect' marriage.

I am sure many of you will be disappointed if I failed to address issues that are relevant to the physical therapy profession. Nigeria, with a population of 148,093,000 by the 2007 census is

served by less than 500 physical therapists. Nigeria is suffering from a chronic brain drain as the elite professionals are taking their talents not only to the developed countries of the world but even to neighbouring African countries. Physical therapists of Nigerian descent practising in this country are estimated at about 100. To have about 20% of our physical therapist workforce in America is a serious depletion of the Nigerian health care manpower.

Many of the Nigerian trained physical therapists enter the USA under the visa lottery programme or through the H-1B work authorization visa issued in the 1990s in response to the shortage of physical therapists nationwide. Today, the number of physical therapists entering the country has been curtailed by more stringent professional license requirements enacted by the American Physical Therapy Association. Only individuals with at least a Master's degree are now qualified to enter the USA to practice physical therapy.

A serious concern to me, as an educator, is the relatively low pass rate of Nigerian trained physical therapists on the National Physical Therapy licensure examination given by Foreign Credentialing Commission on Physical Therapy. Less than 30% of foreign trained physical therapists successfully pass the examination at first attempt. Many of our Nigerian trained physical therapists struggle to pass the board examination and the English language requirements.

The poor performance of Nigerian trained physical therapists on the board examination can be attributed to several factors, such as the dearth of state of the art equipment; infrastructure limitations; content deficiencies in the curriculum; differences in socio-cultural norms, and the obvious differences in the disease patterns between Nigeria and the United States. The physical therapy curriculum in Nigeria places great emphasis on the management of infectious diseases (sequelae associated with poliomyelitis, malaria, tuberculosis, meningitis), compared with the USA where emphasis is on chronic diseases (heart disease, diabetes, stroke). Nigerian-trained physical therapists may not have treated a child with autism, cystic fibrosis, or lupus until they arrive here in the USA.

On a positive note, I submit that Nigerian-trained physical therapists, because of the extensive period they spend in the hospital environment have better clinical skills than their USA-trained counterparts. On the other hand, the USA-trained physical therapists have more in-depth knowledge of the science of physical therapy. Our educational programme in Nigeria needs to be upgraded to the entry-level doctorate in physical therapy by redesigning the curriculum to include course work in pharmacology, physical diagnosis and evidence-based practice.

The majority of Nigerians are in America today because of the economic realities in our homeland. We, 'Andrews', as we are often called in Nigeria, left our motherland in search of better career opportunities and for economic self interest. Aside from the economic preservation factor, I have in the past wondered about other plausible motivation for coming to America? How professionally fulfilled are we?

Our own, Dr. Adetoyeje Oyeyemi has provided answers to the above questions. In a series of studies, he compared the job satisfaction of physical therapists in Nigeria with Nigerian physical therapists practising in the United States. Paradoxically, the study found that Nigeria physical therapists practising in the US are not more satisfied than their counterparts in Nigeria. Overall, both groups were comparable and satisfied with the 'clinical practice' aspects of their jobs, but differed on issues relating to stress, paperwork and physical demand. USA-based physical therapists perceived their job to be more stressful, with greater paperwork and physical demands. The study concluded that other factors that are not related to the clinical aspects of physical therapy are responsible for the wave of emigration of physical therapists from Nigeria.

In another study, Dr. Oyeyemi compared the skill, quality of life, professionalism and self-esteem of Nigerian physical therapists in the United States and those in Nigeria. The US-based therapists have higher self-esteem than therapists in Nigeria. Oyeyemi posited that the self-esteem of the therapists is influenced by the standard of living, quality of life, and opportunity for continuing education, job

flexibility, and the therapist's frame of reference. Cultural adjustment seems to have minimal effect on self-esteem but career success opportunities modulated self-esteem.

OPPORTUNITIES

Collectively, we Nigerians have a stake in the future of our motherland. I would like to use this auspicious occasion to challenge us to seriously think about how we can contribute to the development of our country. Many of us send money home to family members to help them improve their quality of life. We are generally very patriotic and many of us join tribal associations here in the USA, that is, branches of the associations in Nigeria. These associations, if properly structured, can serve a useful purpose for exchanging critical information that can help our community in the United States. Currently, they are designed to provide humanitarian assistance to our brethren in Nigeria.

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and the University of Ibadan now offer Master's and doctoral programmes in physical therapy. The existing undergraduate and graduate programmes in Nigeria need physical and human resources to maintain credible and high quality education. As an educator, I know that graduate education in physical therapy does not come cheap. We can make significant contributions to the development of the physical therapy programme in Nigeria by sending money directly or collectively to our alma mater in Nigeria. So you need to open your purse and heart by giving generously.

In addition, we can send physical items such as books or research equipment to the physical therapy programmes. We can contribute intellectually by going back to teach for short durations or permanently in any of the physical therapy educational programmes in Nigeria.

With the academic and professional experiences that we have garnered from this country, it is time for some of us to go back to Nigeria to start a business, invest in the growing economy or participate in the political process by running for elective office as

governors or legislators. I realize that these are lofty goals to set because of the unstable political climate and security and safety concerns which are well known barriers that limit the dreams of many Nigerian professionals willing to return home. Let us pray the political environment in Nigeria will improve.

TAKE HOME RECOMMENDATIONS

I would like to end my presentation by offering the following seven ‘nuggets of wisdom.’

Advice #1: You need to be absolutely concerned about the currency of your knowledge base as a physical therapist. You need to constantly evaluate the effectiveness of your clinical interventions. Ask yourself every day, ‘Am I really up to speed? Am I stagnating intellectually, faking it or even worse, falling behind? Am I still learning or am I just doing the same old stuff on a different day, affirming what the late Otis Redding said: ‘Sitting on the dock of the bay, watching the tide roll away?’

Advice #2: As an individual, you need to know your strengths and weaknesses and be true to yourself. I would like to sound a cautionary note. My investigations have documented that ‘burnout’ is a common phenomenon among clinical physical therapists and students. If you reach a point that you no longer like the profession that you have worked so hard to attain, you have to muster whatever self-confidence you have, and every bit of your courage, and make the decision to do something else with your life. It is always better sooner than later, to make that call.

Advice #3: You need to be excited and be happy with what you do! The way to be happy is to like yourself and dedicate yourself to excellence in whatever you do. The way to like yourself is to do only things that give you professional fulfillment. Devote yourself to your kids and family. Nothing else is guaranteed to make you happier in life.

Advice #4: You need to make an enduring contribution to the human race and establish your own legacy. I strongly encourage you to give back to your

community. As an educator, I charge you to be a mentor to someone and assemble pictures of your heroes on your wall, and keep them in your mind as a motivating factor.

Advice #5: Confidence is an important asset to have. You need to believe in yourself and not what the ‘nay sayers’ will tell you. And when they question your dreams, and they say, ‘Why are you moving in that direction?’ say ‘Why not?’ And, oh yes, don’t ever forget to market your talents and new ideas. Use both sides of your brain as you do that.

Advice #6: You must dedicate yourselves to being compassionate and aspire to being the best in whatever you do. I strongly associate myself with the famous quote by the great football coach, Vince Lombardo, who stated that the ‘quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their field of endeavour.’

Advice #7: Finally, I implore you to remain close to your family, friends, and colleagues. They will be your rock when during turbulent periods of your life. Stay blessed, dream big visionary dreams and always make Nigeria proud!

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