

Please introduce yourself,with emphasis on your background,growing up,your dreams and other things you would like to talk about.

My names are Grace Eke-Charrier,I am Efik and hail from Calabar,Cross River State.

I am a United Nations Peace Ambassador and social entrepreneur with an educational background in Marketing from the Kensington College of Business in London and an additional background in project management.I attended Corona School, Victoria Island, St.Mary's Private School,Broad Street and Holy Child College, Obalende,Lagos and St. Andrew's Private Tutorial College, Cambridge,England for my A-levels. I also attended Ahmadu Bello University,Zaria for a while before my Dad withdrew me due to the insurgency at the time.

My parents,Chief Bassey and Princess(Chief) Mrs.Emilia Nsefik Eke of blessed memory,were distinguished civil servants.My Dad was a seasoned diplomat and chartered accountant who served his country diligently and was finally posted to the Ministry of Defence as Chief Accountant,where he subsequently retired.My Mum was an accomplished public administrator and chartered secretary until she became a Director at the Nigerian Ports Authority, Marina, Lagos where she also retired honourably.

Growing up in Ikoyi at the time was pure innocence and total fun.I had a lot of friends and cousins,even though,as I grew up,learned to enjoy my own company,which is reflective of how I live as an adult today.My daughter refers to me as 'the social introvert!' (laughs)

My dream has always been to make an impact in peoples' lives,as we do not have to have a lot,to do the little we can.My Mum was my role model and a few of my very close aunts,one being late Chief Afi Ekong,the prolific artist and entrepreneur.Added to that,she was dedicated to the creation of Cross River State.A struggle that was greatly supported by some patriotic Cross River indigenes living in Lagos in the 70's.She also dedicated her service to the emancipation of women through the National Council of Women Societies,Lioness Club and Esop Nka Idorenyin,Lagos and as a royal princess from Adiabo in Cross River State,she was conspicuous in all palace activities.My parents dedicated their service to God through the support given to the building of the Yaba Presbyterian Church in the 70s.I guess I am a combination of Dad's diplomatic skills and Mum's demure social activism,no doubt,it is these activities that birthed my passion for social issues today with emphasis on persons living with disabilities.(PWDs). Progress in our societies will be meaningful when it provides dignity to all and when it is inclusive.

What is the International Association of Applied Psychology(IAAP) all about?

The International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP) is an NGO accredited at the United Nations with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). We advocate with governments,member states,UN commissions and agencies and other stakeholders about the

importance of psychology to the attainment of the MDGs and the overall global agenda. We currently span all the issues of the MDGs and emerging SDGs with focus on disabilities, poverty eradication, peace and women and collaboratively bring the issue of psychology to UN deliberations.

How does being a professional affiliate of the body benefit Nigerians?

Being a professional affiliate definitely has its benefits in the sense that it provides a platform and opportunity in helping my country attain some of the important UN goals and social issues that she is interested in and focusing on achieving. Civil Society is a 'trusted partner with governments of the UN and has a voice', says the President of the General Assembly, John Ashe.

By this affiliation, I am afforded the total support of PCUN/IAAP to initiate, develop and collaborate on diverse projects that have absolute relevance to the overall UN agenda. Only last December, with the kind influence of the Consul-General, Ambassador Habib Habu, I was able to facilitate a meeting between the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations (PCUN) and Ambassador Usman Sarki, the Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations in New York City. I made a case that if our advocacy as a body was going to be launched, it had to begin with Nigeria and I am elated to say that this meeting was very successful and has metamorphosed into something bigger. We are indeed humbled, and by the graciousness of the DPR, we have just begun partnering and collaborating with a Nigerian government NGO, namely, the Federal Civil Service Staff with Disabilities Multipurpose Cooperative Society, which has Alhaji Abdul-Rauf as the National Coordinating Chairman/CEO at the helm of affairs and who has such a large heart and the best of intentions for the PWDs. Mind you, any collaboration at the international level requires significant communicating, commitment and reporting, and that is my job.

I am passionate about disabilities issues because I happen to have witnessed it first-hand through a very close relative, so I can authoritatively speak about the trauma and psyche which is affected during a trying period such as this. You must keep assuring and reassuring, mentoring and making sure the individual does not fall into or dwell in a state of self-pity and hopelessness which can be very detrimental to the mental state. When this happens, one is virtually on the brink.

I was basically a care-giver for more than seven years.

In addition, the emphasis placed on PWDs today, is highly applaudable. With sincere appreciation to General Ibrahim Babangida who laid the foundation in 1993, following General Olusegun Obasanjo and now President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR, who is very committed to the plight of PWDs and has taken it many steps further by establishing the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities to serve as the platform for the enforcement of all provisions of the Disability Act. We must also appreciate and recognize the voices in the National Assembly like Honourable Abike Dabiri who propagated and sponsored

the Bill on Disabilities, and activists such as Cosmas I.B. Ikoli and Jake Epelle who have constantly canvassed for the support of the vulnerable and physically challenged. We are also thrilled that our governors have keyed into this project by donating lands for the rehabilitation of disabled persons in their respective states. This is highly commendable.

What are the programmes you have for people living with disabilities in Nigeria?

The programmes we have for the PWDs shall be strategic and in line with the outcome of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the realization of the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals for persons with disabilities which is deeply rooted in the goals of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is imperative that we make diversity and inclusion a reality too, in the private sector. For example, through my Chair at the UN, Dr Judy Kuriansky, I have had contact with IBM through her Diversity and Inclusion Program Manager (West Africa), Shuyao Kong, to assist the young through middle-aged PWDs (with ICT background) gain internships and permanent employment, even though presently, they can only employ one or two persons a year as the department is still new and growing. We are currently sieving through CVs of PWDs in various disciplines, as we are set to meet other private sector organizations that would commit to partnering with us in order to ensure that our physically challenged loved ones succeed, as anyone else. Mentoring is going to be gradually intense as we shall set out to give them a sense of well-being and the confidence to chart their lives, once they are availed with the opportunities to do so.

For those wishing to be entrepreneurial, skills acquisitions are in the works and shall be made available. We shall set out to assist the widows, orphans and others who fall into this category. Since most of the physically challenged are found in the villages, word is being put across to them through their local governments, village heads and immediate communities for data compilation in order to address these issues. We understand the fact that data compilation even in developed countries can be quite daunting, but better to start from somewhere with what we have, than not at all. Persons with disabilities need to be included in everything and face no limits. There should be equality in education, employment and healthcare. They have a higher suicide rate and so must be taken care of. This is a global agenda and we must go with the flow.

You are also an official team member of Psychology Coalition at the United Nations. Is there any synergy between the body and IAAP?

Yes, I am an official team member of the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations (PCUN) and of course there is a strong synergy between the the body and IAAP.

The PCUN is a group of psychology NGOs accredited at the United Nations with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the IAAP is one of the parts. We recently submitted statements to the recent UN high-level meetings on persons with disabilities, the just concluded Commission for Social Development and the forthcoming 58th Session of the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) holding this March.

Why do you think Nigeria is still lagging behind in the area of Milleneum Development Goals(MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs) and other programmes that are crucial in the global agenda?

Personally, I would not say Nigeria is lagging behind in the attainment of the Milleneum Development Goals. We should resist comparing ourselves with developed countries who have had their policies neatly put in place years ahead of us and are abiding by them to the letter, although it is good to do so once in a while as a yardstick, to measure how far we have gone or not going. We should constantly be reviewing our goals and going back to the drawing board again and again, to re-strategize. It's what the big boys do. However, there is a gap between policy-making and implementation. Once government can bridge this gap, things shall definitely fall into place. Nigeria, albeit, is faring reasonably well in terms of promoting women empowerment, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Nigeria must prioritize the issue of poverty eradication. The emphasis on climate change must be upped a further notch by putting more measures in place that would cushion the effects of extreme rainfall and desertification and most importantly, there must be environmental stability in the Niger Delta.

How can you describe the reception of the Nigerian government to this initiative?

The FCSSD has been very receptive on the need to collaborate with the PCUN to improve the lives of PWDs and we recently held meetings with the Board, under the Chairmanship of Alhaji Abdul-Rauf, to begin working out modalities to this effect. The meetings are on-going, cordial and successful.

**What have you been doing before venturing into this Disabilities project?
Do you have other future projects to enhance the dignity of the Nigerian?**

I have been involved in the clamour for the upcoming National Conference in the last two years,through the Nigerian National Summit Group(NNSG)of which I am a founding member,with eminent personalities such as Dr. Patrick Utomi and Mr Tony Uranta as coveners.Thank God our efforts eventually paid off. I am as well putting together a social enterprise which shall be unveiled in due course. We shall spread our tentacles to the grassroots in order for our loved ones benefit immensely from the initiatives we will be putting in place.We shall be partnering with the public and private sectors and other well-meaning persons.Once the structures are in place,we shall do a launch.