

How a college drop-out came back to become a Law School Star Pupil (valedictorian)

*Augustine Sorie-Sengbe Marrah Esq.
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Ten years today—31st October 2009, I was certified by the then Hon. Chief Justice as having successfully passed the Bar Final Examinations. But four years before that, I was a drop-out from Fourah Bay College. I was in year two (sophomore), writing the now Justice Miatta Samba's First Semester Contract Law exams when I was whisked out of the examinations hall, like a common criminal, for failing to pay my college tuition fees. My parents had prior to my admission tried severally in talking me out of pursuing law and alternatively proposing that I study Economics, simply because they couldn't afford to pay the enormous tuition fees for the law program. Piecing together the first year's fees actually landed them in huge debts which ended in a police matter (I was to, in later years, render legal services to the complainant-creditor).

While out of college, I resolved on undertaking an informal job, anything that will help me pay my way back and through college. My father took me to one of his brothers (actually a distant cousin but in our Koranko culture, there are no cousins, everyone is either a brother/sister); he was a well-placed civil servant by then. He didn't know a whiff of my cognitive ability then, so he reached out to an Indian friend who was the owner of Daswani Enterprises at Murray Town to hire me. I was instantly hired as a labourer in their candle factory, they didn't know and couldn't have cared that I was a year two law student by then. For a few months, I was nothing but a hireling in the manual work of making candles and toting cartons of the finished products for the day. But I kept company with my law books at night like I had exams the following morning. I must confess that during this period, I struggled in my faith in God and began to fiddle around atheistic philosophies. That was the beginning of my cursory spell with atheism. One day, few months into my time at the candle-making factory, during our usual once-a-week delivery, I ran into a Member of Parliament at Sani Abacha Street. I had met Hon. Janet Sam-King (an SLPP Member of Parliament) at a Commonwealth Youth Mock Parliament in which I played the role of Majority Party Leader. She was impressed with the precocity displayed by not just myself but the likes of Chernor Bah, David Sengeh, Julian Cole, Osman Timbo, Tima Brew, Kadiatu Kamara to name but a few, in our mock

roles in the youth parliament. On recognizing me, she immediately enquired about my wellbeing and University work. Departing from my characteristic silence of my plight, I retorted that I'd dropped out of college because of tuition fees. With pity paralyzing her facial contours, she requested I meet her at the House of Parliament at Tower Hill the next day. Early in the morning the next day, as soon as I got to Parliament, we hopped into her vehicle whirring away to the Ministry of Education at New England Ville. Immediately we got into the Minister's office, she took out my WASSCE result and splayed it in front of Dr. Alpha Wurie and enquired why I was not granted a government scholarship. I passed the WASSCE with one of the best results in the Arts—3 A's (one of the subjects was Mathematics), 2 B's, a C & D. Immediately, Dr. Wurie whose face beamed with admiration at the A1 in Mathematics for an Art student asked whether I ever applied for the Sierra Leone Grant-in-Aid scholarship. I nodded affirmatively and muttered that I was even short-listed but my name never appeared in the final list of grantees. He then summoned the Education Secretary instructing him to immediately grant me the government scholarship. Hon. Sam-King whom I now call *Mummy* (because of the mother-son relationship forged over the years), proceeded with me to FBC to enquire from the administration whether they could permit me to write the second semester exams which was only few weeks away. The then Registrar explained the difficulties of re-admitting me at the twilight of the year and advised I re-enroll the following year. So, I spent the next few months working in the restaurant at Parliament as a bartender to raise more resources to meet other expenses of studies.

The hurdle of paying my law school's fees, was partly taken care of when I was awarded a prize money of £500 for winning a British Council Essay Writing competition in celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of slavery. The money was not sufficient to fully pay up the fees and so on few occasions I was asked out of the class but only for few minutes. Despite all hurdles, I emerged the Star Pupil at the Bar Finals Examinations 2009 and was the valedictorian at the Call to the Bar ceremony on 31st October 2009. My speech during the 'Call night' is widely remembered by many congregants and perceived as unsurpassed in the life of the Sierra Leone Law School.

The crucibles seemed at an end in October 2009 but I suffered yet another, though slight upset (and for the second time in my life), when my possessions then which could not fill up even the large-sized Ghana-must-go bag were thrown out of a room I was squatting in with my friend, Alimamy Sultan

Koroma (aka ‘Alimamy Koro’—who is also a now lawyer—his own things were thrown out too) onto an unroofed structure. That was December 2009 and at that time I was already a lawyer! Just in ten years, I now own properties legitimately acquired from the sweats of my brow by the grace of He who gives power to make wealth.

So, don’t quit; don’t give up on your pursuits even when you come within an ace of death. Work as hard as your faith is, the God who sees in secret would reward you. As a teen, a trainee teacher did a student assessment about me in Class 5 (1995) and stated in her report (which copy I have to this day) that I wanted to be a lawyer. I do not still recall how I could have come up with that choice. I didn’t know any lawyer back then in Thunder Hill, Kissy. The first time, I met with a lawyer was in 2003 and it was Sulaiman ‘Borbor Kabba’ Koroma (one of my father’s all-time best students). I was to later meet Mr. Yada H. Williams who has remained my greatest influence in the law and a man who mentors me to this day.

I hope you would henceforward excuse my usually undisguised impatience with injustice and all the issues which clog the machinery of justice. For some of us, being lawyers is a call to ministry. That is why injustice irks me; delays in the administration of justice riles me up and any semblance of using the judicial corridors to launder political misdemeanors galls me.

P.S. This is just a snippet of a later autobiography—in celebration of my tenth anniversary as a lawyer!

About the author:

Augustine Sorie-sengbe Marrah is an activist lawyer, a leading human right practitioner, democracy enthusiast and a rule of law campaigner. He is regarded by many as an anti-establishmentarian, a constructive social deviant and a dogged non-conformist to the political sterility. He’s currently the Acting Chairman of the Renaissance Movement (Sierra Leone).