

GOVERNMENT COLLEGE UGHELLI (GCU) REMINISCENCES

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1955-1962

Outline of Presentation

- Growing Up in Benin City – My Early Childhood
- Getting into Government College Ughelli
- My early years at GCU
- Typical Weekday – Bells, Bells, Bell
- Typical Weekend Days
- Sports Reminiscences – football, cricket, athletics, tennis.
- Academic Reminiscences
- Other Reminiscences
- African Scholarship Program of American Universities (ASPAU)
- Post GCU Experiences including Education and Professional Life
- Thank You

Growing Up in Benin City

My Early Childhood

- Born in 1942 to Christiana Eyuwa Ogiamien and Aristotelis Thomopoulos.
- Mother was daughter of prominent Chief in Benin, one of three children by the same mother. Her father had several wives and children in a polygamous environment.
- Father was Greek and he came to Nigeria with his brother to establish an import/export business, exporting natural resources and importing textiles and other goods. They established retail stores in Lagos, Benin and Sapele – S. Thomopoulos & Co.
- Father was a polygamist in Nigeria and fathered several children as several Greeks did in those days. He lived between Lagos, Benin and Sapele.
- Lived with Mother, grand mother and my siblings – an older brother and three sisters.

Growing Up in Benin City (Contd.)

- Attended Church Missionary Society (CMS) Elementary School, on Sakpoba Road, about 10 minutes walk from my home.
- Went to Anglican Church at the same school location.
- Mother was a trader with a shop in the Benin City Market. Went to the market after school. She was first woman to build a two-storey home in Benin from the proceeds of her trading.
- Recollection of life in Benin City – friends, fun times, and some mischievous behavior.

Getting into Government College Ughelli

- Senior brother, Simpson was a student at Edo College. Incentive to attend a top secondary school.
- Sat for the Common Entrance Examination for entry to the Government Colleges.
- Was invited for interview at GCU – first ever trip outside Benin City.
- Mother accompanied me on the journey – ride from Benin to Sapele; canoe trip across the river to Sapele; another ride from Sapele to Ughelli.
- Passed the interview and admitted to GCU beginning September 1955

Getting into GCU (Contd.)

- Departure for Ughelli to start school was sad occasion. Recall crying throughout the journey from Benin to Ughelli – same mode of travel.
- Dreaded the canoe trip across the river as I did not know how to swim if it capsized.
- Arrived at GCU and entered Warri House. My sadness of leaving home disappeared within a day as I interacted with the new and old students from across Nigeria. Life was going to be good.
- Arrived with two luggages of clothes but most of my clothes other than the evening attire were sent back home as not needed. School provided school uniforms with laundry service, books, room and board. The message was clear – all students were equal whether from a rich family or poor family. We were the same.

My Early Years at GCU

- The GCU Campus – great difference compared with Edo College
- Campus layout was impressive – grand entrance via Appian Way. It accommodated all its own facilities that made the school totally self-sufficient in everything.
- Administration block, classroom block, science block, library, sick bay, dining hall, assembly hall, metal and wood workshops, student dormitories (Forcados House, Warri House, School House, Sapele House and Ashaka House), sport fields and tennis court, Principal's residence, House Masters' residences, teachers' residences, fruit orchard, power plant, water treatment plant, etc.

My Early Years at GCU (Contd.)

- Introduction to structured life and discipline for the first time in my life.
- House rules and School rules.
- Violation of School rules resulted in detention, the punishment of which was manual labor during siesta.
- Three detentions in one semester led to a visit to the Principal's office where corporal punishment was administered by the Principal himself.
- My mischievous behavior and violation of the school rules earned me three detentions in my first year at GCU and a visit to the Principal's office. Mr. Carter, who was the Principal at the time, in no uncertain words admonished me that a repeat appearance would result in my suspension from the school.
- That visit completely changed my life and behavior at GCU. Who would want the disgrace of being sent home from one of the most exclusive schools in Nigeria?
- I would end up being a School Prefect and Head of Warri House by the time I completed by education at GCU.

Typical Weekday - Bells, Bells, Bells

- Typical weekday started at 6:00 am with the House bell wakeup ring summoning us to put up the mosquito nets, make our beds, and arrange our lockers. This daily ritual was ingrained in us after leaving school – GCU Old Boys would never leave their beds unmade.
- The next bell rang about 6:15 am to undertake house chores – sweeping dormitories, cleaning the toilets, cutting the grass, trimming the hedges, tend the flower beds.
- The 6:45 am bell rang for us to end our respective chores, take a shower, and prepare for school with the morning assembly and early classes.

Typical Weekday - Bells, Bells, Bells (Contd.)

- The next bell signaled the beginning of breakfast after the early classes
- The next bell was for resumption of classes followed by the bell for the beginning of lunch
- The bell rang again for commencement of siesta at 2:30 pm and its completion at 3:30 pm. For students under detention, the bells summoned them to start their punishment during the siesta time.
- The period after siesta was free time followed by manual labor by half of the school and sports by the other half on alternate days. One day of the week was for hobbies, etc.
- The bells summoned us for dinner followed by compulsory prep time from 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm. House prefects made announcements thereafter.
- Final bell at 9:30 pm signaled “Lights Out”. However, it was not unusual for some students to try to read with candles risking being caught and punished.

Typical Weekend Days

- Saturdays were for sports – intramural between the Houses.
- Saturday evenings were for socials, including dancing, etc.
- Sundays were for church and free time. Occasionally we attended the Anglican church in town. The girls from the Anglican Girls School would usually also be there.
- If you had permission from your parents/guardians, you could leave campus during the weekends to go to the town. Otherwise, you remained on campus.

Sports Reminiscences

- We all participated in sports – football, cricket and athletics. However, these were not areas of strength, the exception being tennis. GCU had great sportsmen who excelled in all three sports – Akpore and Eghagha come to mind.
- The sporting facilities were excellent – special athletics field, football fields and cricket fields. The pavilion was something to behold and was said to be the first one at a secondary school in Nigeria.
- Recollection of playing cricket was mostly of trying to catch fly balls only to have them fall through my hands.
- Did better in Athletics - long distance and can still hear the sound of encouragement “here comes Thomopulos” as I raced to overtake some of the students in the final stretch.
- Football experience was more my cheering our beloved Warri House Team.

Academic Reminiscences

- Aptitude for math and the sciences
- Latin, history, geography, etc., which required a lot of reading, were not favorites
- Studied during prep hall but not during other free periods
- Avid reader of novels
- Not the top student in my class but was good enough to be admitted to the HSC class

Other Reminiscences

- Lasting Friendships – classmates. Joe Okpaku, Benson Bafor, Obi Okafor, Owolo, Brume, Ebikeme, etc.
- Being made a School Prefect and Head of House
- My brother, Alex being admitted to GCU – Class of 1960. Thomopulos 1 and Thomopulos 2
- Boys will be Boys – mischievous behavior such as raiding the school orchard at night, sneaking to town with other boys on weeknights.
- Even Prefects misbehaved occasionally. Recall the evening that the Principal, Mr. Carter walked through the Houses at night and caught some prefects disobeying the lights out rule. They were subsequently de-barred as Prefects in a dramatic manner of removing their Prefect pins during morning assembly.
- Becoming one of the school's pianists – played at morning assemblies and school church services.
- Practicing piano during siesta at the Assembly Hall – introduction to another pianist, a young British Voluntary Service Overseas teacher at the Anglican Girls School who came to GCU to practice on our piano. Development of romance?

Other Reminiscences (Contd.)

- Playing organ at the local Anglican Church services – girls from Anglican School wiping sweats from forehead when pedaling the organ.
- Sad memories – being called names for being of mixed race.
- In my second year, my good friend's dream about my father's death which was dismissed but unfortunately turned out to be true.
- Death of father completely changed my life but thanks to my mother, who sold properties to pay my school fees, I stayed at school. Was not advised of his death due to exams but was finally told when the Daily Times arrived several days later with the announcement of his death
- Carter tried to help secure scholarship unsuccessfully.

Other Reminiscences (Contd.)

- Mr. Carter's golfing - using some students including me as his Caddies.
- African Scholarship Program of American Universities (ASPAU) – open to students who had graduated from secondary schools
- HSC students were not eligible to apply
- Six of us from our HSC Class in Upper Six decided to apply and sit for the exam using other references than those from our principal. Mr. Carter was a reference for me.
- Unfortunately, did not receive the letter inviting me for interview in Lagos. I thought I did not pass the exam.

African Scholarship Program of American Universities (ASPAU)

- Okpaku II, Owolo, Brume and one other from our Upper Six Class got letters to attend the interview in Lagos with the Team from the African-American Institute (AAI) that administered the program
- Upon their return, one of them told me that my name was on the list of students who had been invited to the interview. Had not received the letter
- Called the AAI office which confirmed that I was indeed one of the students. Though the Team had returned to the US, was told I could still come to be interviewed by the local AAI representatives
- Got an excuse to leave school for home and travelled to Lagos

ASPAU (Contd.)

- Brume was first to get his letter of admission from the U.S. University.
- Principal at that time – Mr. Edgar – announced the news at Morning Assembly with congratulations
- Shortly thereafter, Okpaku and Owolo got their letters
- I still remember Bafor running from the school mailbox to Warri House shouting my name with a letter from the University of Kansas
- Mr. Edgar became furious – the best students in the Class were not going to be finishing their Upper Six at GCU
- We departed GCU to head for the U.S. without finishing Upper Six

ASPAU (Contd.)

- The journey to the USA – flight from Lagos to Niamey to Paris
- Short stay in Paris – red light district
- Journey from Le Harve, France to Hoboken, NJ on a ship with other students from Africa, Asia, etc. Stopover in Southampton.
- Beginning of orientation on US life – remember learning to dance the Twist
- Arrival in U.S. – short tour of New York City with a host family
- Bus travel to Kansas
- Stay with a farm family until beginning of school

Post GCU Experiences

- University of Kansas, Lawrence – graduated in 1965
- Joe Okpaku was in Evanston, Illinois at Northwestern University. He visited Lawrence
- My brother Alex was admitted to University of Kansas
- Admitted to University of California, Berkeley for Master's degree
- Summer employment prior to departing for Berkeley in the Fall
- Was offered a summer internship with a firm in Iowa that had an office in Nigeria
- Was the beginning of over 50 years of employment with the firm including assignments in Lagos, Nairobi, Monrovia and back to Headquarters in Muscatine, Iowa

Thank You

- My education at GCU was the greatest event in my life
- It prepared me for all I ever accomplished in my academic and professional life
- Thanks for the opportunity to share these reminiscences with you.