

Tragic accident claims 6 family members

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BY the time Eunice Jude, now two and a half years old, becomes old enough to learn how the story of her life was utterly changed on the eve of last year's Christmas, she may for the rest of her life never look to the festive season as a period of joy and celebration. Instead, she may perhaps regard it as a time of mourning, grief and feeling of infinite sadness.

For now, she is yet to comprehend the tragic event that happened to her and the rest of her family on December 24, 2009, which left her with black eyes.

Before that fateful day, little Eunice was the last child in a family of six. Her father, Mr Jude Ediaawe, had long settled in Kano working as a dealer for the petroleum company, Total. Eunice's mother, Mrs Bose Ediaawe, was on the employment of a private security company called Niger Guards as its secretary, while her siblings Deborah, Benjamin and Daniel attended school.

For little Eunice, this was her family and the only world she knew. But as they were travelling to their hometown in Edo State for the Christmas, they had a terrible car accident that literally obliterated all other members of the family. Eunice was the last person standing.

It was in the tradition of Mr Ediaawe to return home in Apekpella Okpella in Etsako East Local Government Area in Edo State every end of the year to celebrate Christmas in the company of his extended family. And as the family's breadwinner, not just his presence but his support was very important for his relations back home.

Since his father died ten years ago, the responsibility of fending for his mother and eight siblings fell squarely on his shoulders as the eldest child with means of livelihood. But Jude had included yearly remembrance of his father in his schedule of activities whenever he visited home for Christmas. This year, the patriarch's death clocked 10 and he had put all the necessary arrangements in order for a befitting 10th anniversary celebration with family members, relations and friends from home and abroad. All for the events and a hitch-free journey home, Jude bought a second-hand Mercedes Benz station wagon car, big enough to convey his family and two of his siblings, Edet and Rebecca.

Before setting out for the trip, he bid farewell to his friends in Kano and asked his close friend, Mr Ajigbola Samson, who is also a staff of Total, to supervise the activities of the Airport Road Filling Station he oversees. Samson recalled that his last word with his friend that evening was, "I wish you safe journey and I will be expecting your call."

But it was what transpired between him and his manager, Alhaji Salisu Jikanjaji, on the same day he delegated Samson to look after his business that leaves Jikanjaji thinking his boss had premonition he was not going to return. "After he spent a long time counselling and advising me on how to go about my job without causing any problem in his absence," Jikanjaji recalls "he called me in the night again and started repeating the same thing. But because I

was not hearing him clearly on the phone, I decided to go and meet him at the filling station that night," he said.

"When I came back to the filling station and met him that night, he appeared weak and repeated his earlier entreaties to me, but this time in an emotion-laden voice saying, 'please, please don't give room for anybody to find fault with us, so that I will not be in problem when I return from home.' He advised me as if he knew he was going to leave this world," said Jikanjaji.

As early as 5:30am the following morning, the family of six, including Edet and Rebecca, started for home. But after one and a half hour into the journey, they had a tyre burst near Zaria in Kaduna State, Edet, who also survived the crash, said.

Narrating how the incident occurred to *Weekly Trust* at Dala Orthopaedics Hospital, Kano, where the third survivor, Rebecca, is receiving treatment for multiple fractures, Edet who escaped unhurt revealed, "As we approached Zaria around 6.30am, our front tyre burst and I watched as my brother struggled to control the vehicle which was swerving and meandering dangerously on the road. As he was struggling with the wheels, the car suddenly started somersaulting, bumping and hitting the ground rapidly. At a stage, other occupants of the car were flung out, including eight-year-old Daniel who was sitting on my lap. I can't recall how he broke free and flew out of the car, because I wrapped him in my arms."

Edet told our reporter that when the tumbling finally came to a halt, he discovered he was the only one still inside and quietly sat in his place behind the driver's seat as if nothing had happened. But as he was still seated, he said a thought quickly crept into his mind. "My mind told me to jump out of the vehicle that it was going to catch fire. So I jumped out through the window. I checked inside it to be sure everyone was out," he recalled. But the happiness he felt thinking all his relations had escaped unhurt quickly evaporated as he turned around to see the carcass of what was once his brother's luxury car. He spotted his brother and the wife groaning and writhing in pains.

Edet said he didn't waste time waiting for rescue to come. "I started trying to do what I could before anybody came to render assistance," he said. That is when he discovered that the impact of the crash was far more than he had thought. "I discovered that Madam (Eunice's mother), Deborah (her 13-year-old sister) had already passed out and as we tried to evacuate the ones that were still alive, Benjamin (10 years old) and Daniel died," he recounted.

When rescue finally arrived, Edet said he took part in lifting his injured brother, a sister and niece into a vehicle that conveyed them to Ahmadu

Bello University Teaching Hospital, Zaria. Shortly afterwards, doctors struggled to save the lives of Mr Ediaawe, his sister, Rebecca and little Eunice at the emergency ward of ABUTH in Zaria. Edet recalled kneeling down in the hospital where he solemnly begged God to answer a prayer which he said was most important at that critical moment. "I begged God, 'if my brother is going to die, please spare



THE Judes perished in fatal, leaving only baby Eunice



THE survivors

his life and take mine instead,' so that his dependants will not suffer from his loss. He was all we were looking up to," he said, as he tried to prevent himself from breaking into tears.

He continued, "My brother was the one providing for all our needs since our father died in 1999. We looked to him for what we eat, the clothes we wear and everything we want". But Jude eventually died on the same day. His friend, Samson, who revealed to *Weekly Trust* that he spent three days crying, recalled how he got the news. "I received a phone call immediately after the incident, so I rushed to Zaria in a chartered taxi because I could not drive my own car. I was devastated! When I got to the hospital, my friend was in a coma. I spent some hours there before I started the journey back to Kano. But before I got to Kano, I received a call informing me that my friend had died," Samson recalled.

He said, "I cried for good three days and whenever I remember how nice Jude had been to me, I would break down in tears again."

Jude was buried at his hometown in Edo State on 26th December, 2009 the same day he had planned to commence the two-day 10-year remembrance of his late father. Samson, who attended the burial, said the deceased's mother, relations and members of his Apekpella Okpella community were tremendously shocked and devastated. However, Jude's wife, Bose and her three

children, Deborah, Benjamin and Daniel, were interred in Zaria.

Edet who plays amateur football for a local team, Super Bees in Hoto, Kano, told *Weekly Trust* that he prefers not to go back to their Hoto residence from where they embarked on the ill-fated journey, believing that, "if I go into the house and enter my brother's room, that will be the time I will know he is truly dead." Therefore, he said he prefers to remain in the orthopaedics hospital where his younger sister Rebecca is receiving treatment.

When *Weekly Trust* visited Rebecca on Wednesday, she was sleeping, while her body was wrapped in bandages. It was gathered that she sustained fractures on her leg and arm. But a hospital official who craved anonymity told our correspondent that she is being prepared for corrective surgery to repair her broken bones. According to the officials, Rebecca is in a stable condition.

He added, "She later demanded why she was at the hospital and in bandages, so I simply told her that she fell from a fruit tree at home. She is preparing to go back to school in the coming year. She secured admission early 2009 and has finished her first session in the university."

Someday, perhaps, the true picture of the tragedy that left her with black patches around the eyes and literally made her the last person standing in a once peaceful and lovely family of six will become clear to her.

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