



THE NATION

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NIGER DELTA REPORT

Corps member who drowned in Bayelsa

Johnson Uduebor, a youth Corps member, drowned in Bayelsa on September 8. Here is the true story of how the Edo State-born star was dimmed, reports **MIKE ODIEGWU**

JOHNSON Uduebor woke up as fit as a fiddle on September 8. The young man, who hailed from Edo State, was full of life. For him, that day in the Ologoghe community, Ogbia, Bayelsa State, where he served his fatherland as a member of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), was bright and held many promises.

A hard-working Uduebor, whose Place of Primary Assignment (PPA) was the Ologoghe Community Secondary School, had a dream. He dreamt of taking advantage of the school holiday to secure his future. He wanted to key into the agricultural revolution by cultivating cassava. His ultimate aim was to keep himself busy after passing out in December instead of parading the streets in search of scarce jobs.

The Batch B Stream 2 Corps member's main objective was to produce cassava flour popularly known as garri because of its scarcity and high demand in Bayelsa. But all his dreams, aspirations and efforts were swallowed by Bayelsa waters.

Uduebor never knew the danger lurking around. Already, he purchased a parcel of land alongside his colleague and lodge mate, Jethro Ololade, for cultivation. On the fateful day, the duo set out to clear the land and get it ready for cultivation. They went to the site without their life jackets.

In fact, there was no need for the jackets since the farmland could be accessed by land. As they trekked, they spoke about the farmland; how fertile it was and the kind of yields they expected from it. It was a smooth journey. They got the work done without bruises, though they were exhausted.

At the end, Uduebor and his friend decided to trek back to their lodge. But the Edo man never saw his lodge again. He was buried underneath the water.

Ololade, who survived drowning, but yet to recover from the shock, narrated how they ended up having a boat accident. He said around their lodge, they saw one of their students, a 15-year-old boy, paddling a rickety canoe. The boy, whose name was not given, was just learning how to paddle a canoe.

"We were almost at our lodge because it was a walkable distance when we saw the boy. There was no need for us to board the boat because we would get home without using the water. But on sighting our student, Uduebor beckoned on him.

"When the boy came with his canoe, we exchanged pleasantries with him and Uduebor suggested that we join him in the boat to cross over to the other side since the distance was not much," he said.

Ololade said he tried to discourage him from boarding the canoe. He said the paddler even told them that he was an amateur, who was just learning how to survive the ljaw way. He confirmed that the boy also said the boat was too small and too fragile for three persons.

But the Corps members decided to board for the sake of having the feeling of sailing on water.

"We just wanted to experience being on water for the first time. That's why Uduebor suggested it and I agreed," he said.

The canoe boy struggled with his emergency passengers across the water. He was almost at the shores, when the tide rose with speed and overturned the canoe. Ololade was able to jump with all his energy to the shores and held

tenaciously to a stump of a tree. The canoe boy did the same. Both of them were rescued by an elderly woman.

However, Uduebor was nowhere to be found. He fell into the water that was filled with hyacinths. The community was thrown into confusion when news filtered in that a Corps member was missing along the Ogbia waterways. Some community folks dove into the spot to save him but could not find him.

Ololade said: "I was able to struggle and hold onto the stump of a tree and was rescued by an old woman. The boy paddling the canoe almost got drowned but was rescued by the old woman too. Johnson was nowhere to be found. He was searched for thoroughly but the search yielded no fruit."

Indeed, the community of Corps members were in disarray when Ololade returned to the lodge without his friend. The leadership of the NYSC in the state immediately started making frantic efforts to locate the missing corps member.

On September 11, the state coordinator, NYSC, Mrs. Loto Bolade, who could not control her tears, led a delegation to the distressed area in the company of the Senior Special Assistant to the Governor on Youth Matters, Appah Kelvin, the NYSC Public Relations Officer, Mathew Ngobua and other senior officials of the scheme.

As the search for Uduebor continued, Mrs. Bolade and her entourage boarded a boat and went round the riverine communities in Ogbia, assembled Corps members posted in the areas and warned them against traveling by water no matter the distance without their life jackets. She reminded them of the orientations they received in the camp on how to use life jackets that were given to them. She prayed for them.

Mrs. Bolade was still hopeful that Uduebor would be found alive. She concluded that perhaps the young man, who was loved in the community because of his humility, intelligence and hard-work, had been rescued in any neighbouring community, but was unconscious to identify himself.

The state government was involved. The government set up a committee led by the former Secretary to the State Government, Chief Serena Dokubo-Spiff with a mandate to comb all the nooks and crannies of the creeks to find the missing Corps member.

On September 12, the committee, including Mrs. Bolade, visited the missing corps member's community and met with the principal of his school. The principal, who lamented the development, said he was not aware that the corps members purchased land for farming.

He said he had given all of them serving in the community a parcel of land for cultivation. He added that if he had known that Uduebor wanted a personal farmland, he would have provided a parcel for him free of charge.

The principal also said the Corps members had no need for cultivation of land since they were to pass out in December. But Ololade explained to the committee that they embarked on the project to keep them busy after passing out because of the high level of unemployment in the country. He said they had planned to come back, harvest the cassava and process it into flour for sale.

Days turned to a week, but Uduebor was nowhere in sight. Funds were provided and more divers and search parties were employed to locate Uduebor. Divers spread their tentacles and



•The late Uduebor

explored the waters of Ogbia, Nembe and Brass. Mrs. Bolade was not herself. Everyday she would go to the community and come back to Yenagoa with sorrow.

Eventually, some experienced divers went back to the spot of the incident and found the remains of Uduebor on September 17. After nine days underneath the water, Uduebor was found clutching heaps of water hyacinth. The body was conveyed to the morgue of the Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Yenagoa.

It was a period of mourning for all the Corps members and officials of NYSC. Mrs. Bolade cried like a baby. She refused to be consoled. In fact, people thought she was the biological mother of the deceased.

On Tuesday, the remains of Uduebor, who

died serving his fatherland were released to his family and evacuated to Edo State for burial. For his parents, it was an incalculable and irreparable loss; an investment gone down the drains.

It was one death too many. They lamented that the death of Uduebor was avoidable. One of the Corps members, who identified himself as Daniel, said he would never go close to water again without his life jacket.

Also, Destiny, another Corps member, described Uduebor as a cool-headed man. He wondered why he boarded a boat without his life jacket.

"Despite all the warnings, it is sad that just a few minutes of joy could land Uduebor in the grave," he said.

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