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- Abandoned in a gutter at birth, 14-year-old loses foster parents same day in auto accident

From LINUS OOTA, Lafia

Life could not have dealt a harsher blow to Mathew Ashwe, 14, an auto mechanic based at Bulkan Sidi in Lafia Local Government Area. To start with, the good-natured boy who hails from Wamba Local Government Area of Nasarawa State was born and abandoned by his biological mother in a gutter in Nyanya, Abuja Municipal Area Council of the FCT, some 14 years ago, before he was adopted by a couple, Mr. Innocent Ashwe and his wife, Joy, married for about 15 years but without a child.

Having adopted him after going through the formalities at the FCT Social Welfare Department where the baby boy was taken to after being picked from a gutter, Innocent and his wife, both successful traders who are into wholesale marketing of food products like beans, rice and palm oil, determined to give him the best of education that any parents could wish for their child.

At this end, they enrolled him at TAAL Primary School, Lafia. But somewhere along the line they started noticing that the boy's interest and probably talent was not in education as they had thought but in something else: a hand skill, hence they always found him in mechanic workshop when he was supposed to be in school studying. It was such that he would often leave home in the morning to go to school but often, he would end up in a mechanic workshop. All attempts to compel him to take his studies more seriously would later prove abortive.

How his foster parents died

Convinced that forcing him to read when his mind and interest are not there would amount to wasted efforts and funds, they withdrew him from school and got him apprenticed to an auto mechanic workshop specializing in Toyota Camry, Honda and Mercedes car models. Managed by one Musa Abdul, after five years of apprenticeship, Mathew completed his programme in August 2017, about two months ago.

Earlier before this date, he had gotten assurances from his parents to open for him one of the biggest auto mechanic workshops in Lafia fully equipped with necessary instruments and to this end, they had already initiated the process of obtaining a bank loan.

But as things stand now, that may no longer be. On September 7, the couple traveled on a business trip to buy drums of palm oil for sale. As fate would have it, they never returned alive, and, neither will they ever. They became involved in a fatal accident and this has thrown Mathew not only into mourning but also filled with a forlorn hope.

The loss and survival strategies

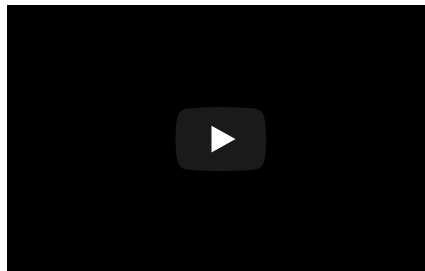
With tears welling up his eyes, he said to *Saturday Sun*: "I have become an orphan with nobody to care for me again. Losing a parent is tragic enough but losing both parents at the same time is quite devastating. Right now, I feel anchorless. I feel as if I am no longer anyone's child. My parents had very good plans for my future. They had been the one stable point in my life. How can I move on in life without them? Oh, I need my mother and father; it is not easy for me. My Daddy died at the age of 47 and, my mummy at 42."

He wished they had died later, in fact, in their old age when he would be able to take good care of them, in appreciation of what they were to him and the great role they played in his life.

"I know their death came too early and it happened in ways I don't like to talk about," he said regrettably. "They were buried after nine days because they were committed Christians, it is not a thing that makes me happy but it is a lesson for me now." He is determined to pick up his life from the point they left it for him to manage, to do something remarkable with it. "I will try to make a living out of my career as a mechanic," he assured our correspondent. "A friend who is close to somebody that runs a big mechanic workshop in Kaduna is linking me up. My parents' relations did not like me, so I will move to Kaduna and will return fully when I have made it. Already, I have taken possession of the little assets they left behind."

From education to auto mechanics

Explaining the mystery behind his sudden switch from book learning to pursuit of a career in auto mechanic skill, he attributed the attraction to the sight of young boys his age learning the work any time he was on his way to school. He would see them lying under a



car as they try to fix one problem or the other and he would become fascinated with their dexterity at what he saw them doing.

But on the first day when he joined them at the workshop after obtaining his parents' consent, blessing and support, his fascination soon gave way to a sense of dread. "My boss would ask me to check the toolbox for spanner of size 10/11 and I would start asking those boys who were there before I came to direct me. That was how I gradually started picking up until I learnt how to dismantle car engines."

One of his neighbours, Mustapha Adamu, who has been living in the same compound with his parents, for over 10 years, described Mathew as a humble and gentle boy who was loved by his parents.

"He vehemently refused to go to school and we advised his parents against forcing him but rather they should support his dream," he recalled. "He was very happy when he was officially allowed to learn auto mechanics because he was not staying in school. He would go out in the morning and end up at mechanic workshop without going to school. I sympathise with him because he is now an orphan but I believe that God will see him through his struggles. Thank God he has a hand work that can sustain his life."

Testimonies of acquaintances

His late father's brother, Mr. Sunday Ashwe, said there is no problem between him and Mathew's late parents. "I supported them to adopt him as their son and we have fully accepted and recognised him as part of the family," he said. "He is humble and I look forward to assisting him within the limit of my resources. He is a nice boy who was loved by his parents. It is unfortunate that they are no more but the good thing is that their son has a handwork to fall back on."

His boss, Musa Abdul, who said he was short of words with which to describe his feelings over the tragedy that befell Mathew, acknowledged the boy as intelligent, hard working and focused. During his apprenticeship, he said, he was able to learn very fast and to learn, within his first two years, how to dismantle and reassemble car engines. "Before their death, his parents were planning to open a big workshop for him," he affirmed. "But that plan did not materialize before they left him. It is quite unfortunate. I told him to come and work in my workshop but I have not seen him up till now. I later learnt that he is planning to relocate to Kaduna. I wish him well."



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