

COVER Story

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HOW MY UNCLE, WIFE, 5 KIDS, NEIGHBOUR PERISHED IN AUTO CRASH—SURVIVOR

From **RAPHAEL EDE**, Enugu

VERA Onyia's story touches the heart. It is the stuff that Nollywood is made of but this is not make-believe. But for kind fate, she would have gone the way of all mortals on June 10. In fact, she missed death by the whiskers.

That day, she was in the same car with her beloved uncle, Pastor ThankGod Ifeanyichukwu Onyia, his wife, Chinwe, their five children—Olive, Chizitelu, Pearl, Precious, Sobe—and a neighbour's daughter, Favour, but a moment after she alighted, the car was involved in a head-on collision with a mass transit bus at Ugwu Onyema, along the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway. And her 46-year-old uncle, his family and a neighbour's only child perished.

Last Wednesday, *Saturday Sun* visited the grieving family and Vera narrated how she narrowly escaped death. Weeping profusely, she said: "On the morning of June 10, 2018, we all prepared to go to church with my uncle, who was a pastor in a Redeemed Christian Church of God parish in Ofofia-Ndiuno in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. On the way, we had a little debate about who was going to cook. I was just recovering from an illness and I told my uncle's wife that I wouldn't be able to cook that day. It was like a debate and she insisted that I must get down from the car and go to a nearby church so that I can come back early to cook. I told her that if she comes back before me, she would cook and if I got back before her I would cook.

"So, it was a deal and I got down at Ogui junction and they continued the journey. Around 1pm, I got a call from one of the neighbour's in the compound that my grandmother was in Enugu and she was looking for me. The neighbour said she was asking why my uncle, her son, didn't come to church. You know, she usually worshipped with them in the same church. But I told her that my uncle went to church, that we all left for church that morning but I got down somewhere. She now told me that I should come back home and I came back and saw my grandmother. I took her to the house and I alerted some other neighbour's that my uncle was missing. I called as many relations as I knew we had in Enugu.

"We all started looking for him. Of course, we have three routes that connect us to Enugu; it is either you go through Udi Road, Milliken

Hill or the Enugu—Onitsha Expressway. One of our neighbours came back and said that there was no accident on the road, the other one said they searched the hospitals and they couldn't find them."

Vera said that at this time, she called her mother who was living at Abakaliki, the Ebonyi State capital, and told her that her brother and his family were missing. "I called my mother around 10pm and told her that we were looking for her brother, his wife, children and our neighbour's daughter. She told me that she would be in Enugu the following morning." Vera said that the following day, her mother's uncle came and told her that they were all gone and that they died in a motor accident.

Describing their demise as painful and horrific, she attributed it to bad governance. "The Enugu—Onitsha Expressway, particularly the Ugwu Onyema axis, is deadly. It has claimed so many lives and then my uncle is finally one of them. He died alongside his wife, his children, eight souls died that morning. Worse still, he was the only male child in my maternal family."

Vera further explained that her uncle hardly used the Ugwu Onyema road because of its bad state but instead always chose the Milliken Hill road. "But unfortunately, the Milliken Hill road was blocked on Saturday, June 9. So when he got to New Market and discovered that Milliken Hill road had been blocked, he took the expressway and that was how he died. But if government had worked on that road, perhaps he wouldn't have died. That road was supposed to be a dual carriage way but the commercial vehicle was coming down to Enugu (against traffic) in his direction while he was going to Ezeagu and they collided. Unfortunately, no one in the commercial bus died but everyone in my uncle's car died."

She also begged for assistance from Nigerians, stressing that her uncle was the breadwinner of the family and now he is gone. "He was to an extent responsible for my upbringing and maintaining my grandmother. We are not the only people mourning. The staff of the Transmission Company of Nigeria (TCN), where he worked are still mourning his exit. Who will ever take his place in the department where he happened to be the manager? Then the Alinwonyia family too, the Nnachi community and everyone around us are still mourning the loss of our brother.

"Ever since I was born till this very moment,



THE LATE COUPLE

this is the first time I am hearing this kind of news because sometimes I will always hear that one person survived but in our own case no one survived. So, we are begging the government for assistance, more so to reconstruct that road and see that it was completed on record time," she pleaded. The elder sister of the deceased, Mrs Virginia Onyia, who was visibly traumatized, told *Saturday Sun* that she wouldn't have believed that a day like June 10 would come her way but she has submitted to the will of God. She said that the news of the deaths hit her like a thunderbolt.

Vera's mother, Virginia, disclosed that when her daughter called her and told her that her only brother was missing with his family, many thoughts ran through her mind. "I had thought that they were kidnapped. So, I went to some pastors to pray for my brother and his family. It was after the prayers that my brother's body, his wife, five children and the only child of their neighbor, Favour, were found in the morgue. My brother was the only male child in the entire family and the only child of the parent."

On how they were coping, she said that her mother was about 75-year-old. "My brother is the only one taking care of her. He comes to see her every week, precisely on Sundays after church service. My father married only my mother and they gave birth to three children—two females and a male. So, he was the breadwinner of the family."

Burial

"You know that they were buried on June 27, 2018. We appreciate all the people that came to console the family. The transport company that killed them, gave the family N200,000 through the police who have been handling the case. But what could N200,000 do in burial of seven family members? We bought seven caskets, paid mortuary bills, hired ambulance and every other things. People came from far and near for the burial and in our little way we tried to provide water for them." Virginia said they were buried in a mass grave but were laid down according to their age.

She added: "My father and his brother lived and died at their very old age. Since I was born and grew up, I have never seen such kind of thing or heard of death by accident in this community, let alone the one that wiped out an entire family.

"Although, tongues are still waging with so many stories and speculations going around but we believe in God and my brother was a child of God. So, we cannot question what happened. Let thy will be done. The entire community is in grief because they said he assisted in bringing electricity to the community."

On whether the family had premonition about the incident, the elderly woman said no. "The devil just foreclosed this from us until it happened. Otherwise we would have prayed for God's intervention. I feel so sad that a day like June 10 will be in my life. A day only heir to the family would just perish with his entire family. So praying is no longer enticing to me. In fact, when they are praying if I am there it is only my body present because my spirit is not there," the traumatized woman lamented in tears.

Late Thank God's cousin, Mr. Dennis Ali, described his death as awful. "We do not know how to explain it and it has totally disorganized the family. We expect that government should assist the family because when somebody gave multiple births in the hospital government always come to assist. We don't know why the government did not come for this. We expected that when such kind of incident happens like in our case it is a tragedy and government should show concern. A government that loves its people should show concern that a family of seven just perished in an auto crash as a result of bad road."

The Senior Manager, System Power Lines (SPL), Emmanuel Okoh, described late Thank God as a man of thoroughness, who distinguished himself in chosen profession. He said that he wished that he would have replaced him because he had only less than three months to retire. Few days before his demise, late Thank God was said to have advised his colleagues to be steadfast in walking in the path of righteousness so that they can make heaven.

Day of tears

Indeed, for the Onyia family of Nachi in Udi Local Government Area, July 27 was a day of sorrow and tears. That day, even the heavens joined the traumatized family and community as it rained cats and dogs. ThankGod married his wife, Okwudili Chinwe, on May 20, 2006 and they promised to be together till death do them part. But even in death they remain together. Their remains were buried side by side.



VERA



MRS ONYIA