

## WE'RE STILL IN SHOCK LOSING DAD, DAUGHTER, HER FIANCÉ SAME DAY TO BAUCHI CRASH

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**J**anuary 18, 2022, is a day family of the Director of Planning, Research and Statistics, Legal Aid Council of Nigeria, Mr Enoch Azariah, wished never came. On that day, Azariah lost his life alongside his daughter's and her fiancé in an auto crash at Alkali in Bauchi State.

Sadly, the tears in the eyes of the Azariahs were just getting dry having lost a son who was recently called to the bar, Chanyi, about seven months ago. They hoped to find comfort in the wedding plans of their second child and only daughter, Usulam, when another tragedy struck. *Saturday PUNCH* gathered that Azariah was returning to Abuja where he worked in his new car with his daughter and her fiancé who perhaps would alight on the way.

Usulam caught the attention of Afeez Oluwabemiga, a nurse at the Federal Medical Centre-Yola, where she worked as an intern nurse. She was due to complete the internship next month. Usulam and Oluwabemiga, who was from the South-West, were busy with their wedding plans when death coldly snatched them away.

Before the incident, Oluwabemiga's family had visited Yola, and an introduction was held between the two families. The two families thus looked forward to the traditional and a church wedding which had yet got dates before the crash occurred.

In a grief-laden post by one Jared Andrew, believed to be a kinsman, he narrated how the accident claimed the lives of Azariah, his daughter and Oluwabemiga. Andrew lamented that only seven months ago, Azariah, who was a lawyer, buried his lawyer son, Chanyi.

It was a pensive mood on the day the funeral was held at Zuru village, Demsa Local Government Area of Adamawa State; hometown of Azariah. The milieu was clothed in grief and gloom. Tears flowed uncontrollably from the eyes of family members and sympathisers. The preacher and zonal pastor Ganye zone, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor Hayatu Yusuf in his message, appealed to two categories of people. Those still in sin and individuals desirous of making amends. Azariah's widow, Mrs Felicia Azariah's agony was visible during the event on Tuesday. The widow at the ceremony asked whether death had no other destination than her home. Barely able to hold her scarf falling off her shoulders, Felicia wore agony and remained inconsolable. The wife amid her agony summoned the courage, knelt at the tombs of her departed husband and daughter placed side by side to bid them goodbye. Some family members who spoke with our correspondent on condition of anonymity at the ceremony said the widow remained heartbroken and barely ate since the news was broken to her. She couldn't speak with our correspondent.

Felicia's brother, Lenham Dilli, who said he was the one who went to claim the corpses of his brother-in-law, niece and her fiancé at Alkali, in Bauchi State, described the incident as shocking.

He told *Saturday PUNCH*, "The tragedy is really shocking because Azariah was a good person. We didn't relate as in-laws but as friends. He did discuss everything with me including his plans, dreams and life goals. That was why when I heard of his death I had to pull myself together to rush to Alkali to get his corpse. Incidentally, we spoke in the morning when he was leaving around 6am. He told me about the journey and I wished him well. When I heard about the accident, I called his mobile but it wasn't

### —LATE CIVIL SERVANT'S BROTHER-IN-LAW



reachable. I called my niece's mobile too. It was when the police saw the call on my niece's phone that they knew the caller would be a family member. She saved my number as Uncle Lenham Dilli."

Dilli stated that the police didn't want to break the news to anyone that those involved in the crash died, adding that they only informed whoever called that they were involved in a road accident.

He stated, "But when I called and a policeman picked the call, I told him I was an uncle to the owner of the phone and begged him to tell me what happened. He said he would tell me since he was speaking to a family member who he believed would be able to accept the news in good faith. He broke the news to me that the three occupants of the vehicle died in the accident. I was sad but had to be strong especially when he said the owner of the phone was badly affected. I didn't tell my sister what I heard. I only went to get an ambulance and went to Alkali in Bauchi. I left immediately for Alkali. Though I don't like night travels, I had no choice in this situation. I arrived in Alkali around 1am on January 19, 2022. The police received us and released the three corpses to us and we left there immediately and got to Yola around 6:30am."

Dilli further said that the incident was a cruel one for the family, noting that it was unbelievable that someone he spoke with on the phone at 6am died a few hours after the call.

He stated, "The accident is a cruel one to us. It is better for someone to be sick and die than this disturbing news. We spoke at 6am and I heard of his death by 10am. It's shocking to lose loved ones this way. We are still in shock."

According to him, the police told the family that a tyre burst led to the accident which caused the vehicle to swerve before hitting a truck on the other lane at Alkali in Bauchi State, en route Abuja.

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He said, "We were told that the truck also tried to avoid running into another car after it swerved off its lane due to a burst tyre. But I picked holes in the explanation because the police were not at the scene when the incident happened. That must have been an eyewitnesses' account or that of the truck driver. Azariah's vehicle is brand new. I don't know where the issue of tyre burst came from."

Dilli also stated that the phones of Azariah's and his son-in-law-to-be were destroyed, adding that his daughter's phone was intact. He said, "I assume that maybe she put it in her handbag, as most women do."

Some colleagues of Azariah who attended his burial eulogised his virtues. Azariah had only spent a few months as the Director, Planning, Research and Statistics, Nigerian Legal Aid Council.

He was said to be due for retirement in 2024, when he must have attained the mandatory 35 years of service in the civil service.

Also at the funeral, his secretary, Mrs Ladi Busari, said his boss occupied the position not long ago, noting that they were happy with him because he acted as a father to them.

She said, "He was like a father to us. He's friendly and an easygoing person. Anything we wanted, we didn't hide it from him. We only needed to tell him and he would grant the request."

Oseni Agboghayemeh, who represented the Director General, Legal Aid Council of Nigeria, Aliyu Bagudu, at the ceremony, stated that his first encounter with Azariah was in 1994 during an induction course he was attending in Yola. He said his late colleague from the first day they met proved to be a worthy man.

He stated, "I am a Muslim and the Quran tells me to

prepare for death every day. Preparing for one's death means one mustn't do evil to anybody and to ensure one is good to everybody. When the time comes, one will be able to account to God. Azariah did good things and I pray that God will have mercy on him and the family he left behind."

Agboghayemeh recounted how Azariah accommodated him in his home after they met in the office. He said when they met, he asked him where he was staying and he told him (Azariah) that he was currently staying in a hotel.

He added, "I was surprised when he took me in his vehicle to the hotel and packed my belongings and drove me to his house where I stayed for four days. Since then, every time I come to Yola, I stay at his place."

Another colleague who also said he experienced Azariah's humanity is the Zonal Director, North-East Zone, Legal Aid Council of Nigeria, Mr Titus Lektu.

Lektu described the late lawyer as a caring, reliable and dependable man imbued with humility. He said, "I came in contact with Azariah in 2005, when I was posted to Yola, Adamawa State capital, as state coordinator, and the late Azariah housed me in his home. In fact, I stayed at his residence for a certain period before I got accommodation."

He stated that their last conversation bordered on preparing for retirement and he advised him to focus on it because "the ultimate thing is to retire well."

Lektu noted, "He prayed for me, saying the ultimate thing is to retire well. I didn't know it was going to be our last conversation because he was a good man. We spoke in Yola when I visited the branch there to know the needs there so I could make a report to the headquarters in Abuja."