

By Mark Mantey, Ahotokurom, Ghana, West Africa

My parents were both Leprosy survivors. People with leprosy suffer greater poverty because their disabilities reduce their access to work. My mother came from a village, north of Lome in Togo, and was relocated to Ghana due to ill health and met my Dad. My father, from the Eastern Region of Ghana, together with my mother received treatment for leprosy at Ho leprosarium for a couple of years. They finally settled at the village of Ankaful Camp (Leper Colony), close to Elmina in the Central Region, where my siblings and I spent our formative years. The living conditions in a poorly constructed mud hut were hard without electricity and running water, but the camp at the end became my comfort zone. When people hear that your parents are leprosy survivors and you live in a leper colony, it doesn't matter much whether you have leprosy or not. You are one of them. Looking back at my childhood my memories of that time were characterised by stigma and rejection, greater poverty, hardship and survival. I had no alternative but learnt as a young boy how to help my parents and the rest of the community (selling tomatoes, fish, and firewood among others).

My parents had a dream for their children. They wanted us to be educated and to escape the life of poverty. They worked hard to provide me with early education. It was tough but through the help of the good services of religious orders, I managed to complete my second level education. At the age of 15 years, I met Sr. Peg Rahilly from the congregation of Daughters of Mary and Joseph. From that time, I began to experience God's love and compassion as I came in contact with Sisters Inez Baranyanka, Kate Creedon, Patricia Pearson, Monica Smyth, among others. Sisters Patricia Pearson and Monica Smyth did everything to provide me with growth and development opportunities, allowing me to believe in myself. My visit to England in the 1990's was an experience I will never forget, as I became completely exposed to a much different, but wonderful world. The compassion and encouragement from the English province of the DMJs was incredible and I would like to acknowledge Sr. Deirdre Slade, Cecile Bale, Ann Jordan, Felicié Wright, Paula Spark, Annette Lawrence, Teresa Clements of the blessed memory and all my friends who made my time a memorable and wonderful experience. I gained independence, good interpersonal and communication skills, and for me that was the beginning of taking responsibility for my own life.

Sisters Patricia Pearson and Monica Smyth recommended me to Fr Patrick Seaver, an Irish Priest, whom I spoke to about my ambition for further education. Due to an extraordinary act of generosity from Fr Patrick Seaver, I was funded to undertake my third level education at the University of Limerick in 2001 as a mature student. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration in 2005, a Masters in Public Administration in 2006 and received my PhD from University of Limerick in 2012. My education and experience is making a huge impact in my working life, where I am able to reach out and help my local communities in Ghana and across different parts of Africa. It has even benefited my home life immensely, creating a better life for my amazing wife Gladys and four beautiful and gifted children; Rita, Joe, Mark and Linda. As a result of the help I received from the Sisters and Fr. Patrick Seaver, the changes in my life have been extended to another generation, as all my four children have received excellent education.



I cannot express enough the remarkable act of encouragement and support I have gained from the Daughters of Mary and Joseph Congregation. The transformation that has taken place in my life is beyond explanation. This change has already been extended to another generation.

Currently, I am the Executive Director of the Padre Pio Rehabilitation centre (PPRC), an agency in which work is primarily based around the rehabilitation and reintegration of Leprosy Survivors and their families, and also children and young adults with special needs. It is time to pay back for these acts of kindness.

The DMJ Sisters are very courageous women and represent the “voice of the voiceless”. They have an amazing record, spending ‘decades caring for and working with many leprosy sufferers’, and the displaced, the disadvantaged and the marginalized. This makes them real agents of change in contemporary African societies, and as a beneficiary of the agents of change, and also witness to the many families empowered and transformed, I can only salute the DMJ’s.