

FROM GRATITUDE TO RESPONSIBILITY - The Story Behind the Chibugwu Institute

One act of kindness can change the course of a life.

Many years ago, a stranger reached out to a family with their little boy who could no longer walk. That single act of compassion transformed not only his future, but also the future of hundreds of children and young people who had not yet been born.

This is the story of how gratitude became responsibility...

...and how responsibility became hope.

Preface

There are moments in life whose significance only becomes clear many years later. At the time, they seem ordinary—a chance meeting, an unexpected conversation, a helping hand offered without hesitation. Yet looking back, we realise that these seemingly small moments quietly changed the direction of our lives.

When I look back today, I can trace the beginnings of the Chibugwu Institute to one such moment. People often ask me why I started a school for children and young people with physical disabilities. Some assume that it began with a carefully designed development project. Others think it was born out of professional experience or academic research.

The truth is much simpler. It began with my younger brother.

His life changed because strangers chose to care.

And once I understood what that meant, I knew that I could never keep that gift to myself. This book is therefore not primarily the story of a school. Nor is it simply my personal story. It is the story of a conviction that has grown over many years:

Every human being deserves the opportunity to discover and develop the gifts that God has placed within them.

Disability does not diminish human dignity.

Poverty does not diminish human dignity.

Social exclusion does not diminish human dignity.

What diminishes human dignity is a society that fails to recognise the value of every person.

If this book encourages even one reader to look differently at another human being...

If it inspires one parent not to give up on a child...

If it persuades one teacher to open a classroom door...
If it moves one young person to believe in his or her own potential...
...then telling this story will have been worthwhile.

This is the story of many people.

Of my family.

Of friends in Nigeria, Switzerland, Austria and beyond.

Of teachers and students.

Of generous benefactors.

Of colleagues who believed in an idea long before there was any evidence that it would succeed.

Above all, it is a story of grace. Because long before I could help anyone else... someone first helped us.

Chapter One

Water for a Village

Some journeys begin with a dream. Others begin with a question. Mine began with both.

I was born and raised in Amokwe, a rural community in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Like many villages across the country at the time, ours was rich in community spirit but poor in infrastructure. We learned early that survival depended as much on the support of one another as on our own determination. Life in the village taught me lessons that no classroom ever could. It taught me that poverty is rarely an abstract concept. It has a face. It has a name. It has a daily routine. One of those routines was the search for water.

Today, many people simply turn a tap and expect clean water to flow. In my childhood, things were very different. Water was scarce, and obtaining it demanded time, strength and perseverance. Women and children often walked long distances carrying heavy containers home. Elderly people living alone sometimes depended entirely on the kindness of neighbours. Children frequently began their day not by preparing for school but by searching for water. Only afterwards could they begin the long walk to the classroom. To me, this never seemed right.

Water is not a privilege. It is one of life's most basic necessities.

As the years passed, I became increasingly convinced that no community could flourish if its people were denied something so fundamental. Long before the Chibugwu Institute came into existence, I therefore became involved in the effort to revive the greater Amokwe

water project. Together with many committed members of our community, we worked to restore a reliable water supply for our people. One visible reminder of those efforts still stands today. A 400,000-gallon Braithwaite water tank rises above the community, only a short distance from the grounds where the Chibugwu Institute would later be built.

Whenever I see that tank, I remember not simply an engineering project, but the people whose lives it was meant to serve. The elderly woman who no longer had the strength to fetch water. The children who could now spend more time learning than carrying buckets. The families whose daily burden became just a little lighter. In 1995, my hometown honoured me with the traditional chieftaincy title **Nwadiioha**, in recognition of my contribution to the revival of the water project.

I accepted the honour with gratitude. But I have never regarded it as a personal achievement. Community development is never the work of one person. It is always the result of many hearts pulling in the same direction.

People also know me by another title. For many years I was simply "Father Uzor," because I became the first Catholic priest from Amokwe. Yet titles have never mattered much to me. A title may earn respect. But it does not define a person's worth. Character does. Service does.

Looking back now, I realise that the water project taught me something far more important than engineering or community organisation.

It taught me that genuine leadership begins by listening. You do not begin with solutions. You begin by asking what people truly need. At the time, however, I had no idea that an even deeper lesson was waiting for me.

The experience that would shape the rest of my life had already begun years earlier, much closer to home. It began with my younger brother. And with a kindness our family would never forget.

Chapter Two

The Boy Who Walked Again

Some memories never fade. They remain vivid not because we choose to remember them, but because they quietly shape the way we see the world. When I think back to my childhood, one image returns again and again.

It is the image of my younger brother crawling across the ground.

As a little boy in the early 1960s, he contracted poliomyelitis—polio, as it is more commonly known. The disease left him with severe paralysis in both legs. While other children ran through the village, climbed trees and chased footballs across dusty fields, my brother learned to move on his hands and knees.

For years, that was his world.

As children, we accepted many things without asking why. Yet even then, I sensed that something was deeply wrong. Not simply because my brother could not walk, but because there seemed to be no hope that his situation could ever change.

In those days, specialised medical care was beyond the reach of most ordinary families in Nigeria. Rehabilitation services were almost unknown in rural communities. Disability was often regarded as a fate to be endured rather than a condition that could be addressed.

My parents refused to surrender to despair. They continued searching for help, even when every door appeared closed.

Then, in 1974, something happened that changed everything.

My father happened to meet an American medical doctor named **Dr. Gauntlet**, who was serving with the Salvation Army near the famous Wonderful Market in Oji River. It was an ordinary meeting. One conversation. Nothing more. Or so it seemed.

Looking back today, I realise that some of the greatest turning points in life arrive without any announcement. They come disguised as ordinary days. Dr. Gauntlet examined my brother and agreed to operate on his legs. For our family, hope suddenly had a face.

The operation was successful. Afterwards, my brother was fitted with calipers and crutches that enabled him to stand and walk again. I still remember the first time I saw him upright. It is difficult to describe what that moment meant to us.

People often think that walking is simply about movement. It is not. To stand upright is to meet the world eye to eye. It is to regain something that illness had stolen—not only mobility, but confidence, dignity and independence.

Those early calipers were crude by today's standards. Two metal bars supported each leg, joined at the thighs by rigid metal rings. They were heavy. Uncomfortable. The rings rubbed painfully against his skin and left deep wounds on his legs. Yet I never heard him complain. The joy of walking again outweighed every discomfort.

Whenever I remember those days, I realise that my brother taught me a lesson long before either of us understood it: Human beings are remarkably resilient. When they are given hope, they can endure extraordinary hardship.

My brother returned to school. He completed his secondary education. Later he found employment with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Enugu State. For many families, that alone would have been considered a miracle.

But God was not yet finished writing his story.

Years later, after I had travelled to Austria for my studies, taking a walk in the Anichstrasse in Innsbruck, I observed a man fitting the legs of a young girl with a pair of modern calipers. Overwhelmed at the sight, I stood glued in front the shop's window. The man beckoned me inside and told me that he could produce a similar pair of calipers for my brother, if I brought him a plaster cast of his legs. Shortly after, Father Claus Schweigl, a Jesuit priest and the study prefect of our college at the time, together with his siblings offered to take care of the cost of production and delivery to my brother. This brought a great and unimaginable relief for my brother. That was not all...

Three years later, some friends around Mrs. Monika Amort in Wörgl, Tirol, asked if there was anything they could do for me. Their generosity surprised me. I did not ask for anything for myself. Instead, I told them about my brother. I explained how much I wished he could study Prosthetics and Orthotics in Tanzania, so that he might one day help other people living with disabilities. Without hesitation, they organized themselves into a «Solidarity Circle» and raised the money for his journey.

Once again, strangers were opening a door for our family.

When my brother arrived in Tanzania, however, another disappointment awaited him. The training institution refused to admit him. The reason was painfully ironic. They believed that his own physical disability made him unsuitable for the profession. I could hardly believe it.

The very experience that would have made him an exceptional prosthetist was used to exclude him. For a moment, it seemed as though the dream had ended before it had even begun. But once again, grace appeared through unexpected people.

When my friends in Austria learned what had happened, they refused to accept defeat. Instead of abandoning the plan, they looked for another possibility. The Directress of the institute in Tanzania had told my brother that her University in the United States could have a place for him. Following that lead, they decided to sponsor his university education there, supported by another friend from Vitznau in Switzerland, now late Madam Erika Bättig.

Looking back now, I often wonder how differently our lives might have unfolded if they had simply said, «*We tried*». Instead, they asked, «*What else can we do?*»

That question changed everything.

My brother went on to study in the United States. Years later, he earned a PhD in Public Health Administration.

Whenever people ask me why I believe so passionately in education, I think of him. His intelligence had always been there. His determination had always been there. His dignity had always been there. What had been missing was opportunity. That realisation never left me. It planted a question deep within my heart: *If one boy's future could be transformed because a few strangers believed in him... How many other children were waiting for someone to believe in them?*

At the time, I did not yet know the answer. But I knew one thing with certainty. The greatest disability I had witnessed was not paralysis. It was the failure of society to recognise the gifts that God had already placed within people.

That conviction would eventually become the foundation upon which the Chibugwu Institute would be built.

Chapter Three

When Gratitude Became Responsibility

People sometimes ask me whether founding the Chibugwu Institute had always been my dream. I usually smile. Because the honest answer is no.

I never dreamed of founding a school. I never imagined establishing an organisation. I certainly never imagined spending decades planning buildings, raising funds, recruiting teachers or supervising construction projects. Those things came later.

What came first was a question that refused to leave me alone: *What do we do with the grace we have received?*

My brother's story could easily have ended very differently. Had my father never met Dr. Gauntlet... Had my Austrian friends chosen not to help... Had someone decided that my brother was not worth investing in... our family's story would have been very different.

Instead, we experienced something extraordinary. People who owed us nothing changed our lives. Not because we deserved special treatment. Not because we had influence. Not

because we could repay them. They simply recognised our humanity. That experience humbled me. It also challenged me.

For years, I carried a growing conviction within me. Gratitude cannot remain a private emotion. If it is genuine, it must eventually become responsibility. I did not arrive at that conviction overnight. It grew slowly as I continued my studies and later my ministry in Europe.

Living abroad gave me something I had never expected. It gave me a new perspective on disability. For the first time, I regularly encountered people with physical disabilities participating naturally in everyday life. I saw students attending university. Professionals pursuing successful careers. Parents raising families. People using wheelchairs travelling independently. Children learning alongside their classmates.

The societies I encountered were far from perfect. Prejudice still existed. Barriers still existed. But there was an important difference. People were working to remove those barriers. They believed that disability should never be allowed to determine the value or future of a human being.

Every time I returned to Nigeria, the contrast became more painful. I saw young men and women with physical disabilities sitting beside busy roads, exposed to dust, traffic and rain, surviving by begging from strangers. Some displayed their disabilities as openly as possible because experience had taught them that visible suffering often attracted more sympathy. Whenever I witnessed this, something inside me resisted. Not because I looked down on those who begged. Never. I understood that many had no alternative. What disturbed me was that society had left them with no better choice. People often assumed that these young men and women were incapable. I could never accept that. Whenever I looked at them, I saw my brother. I knew what he had become. I also knew what he might have become had no one intervened. The difference between those two futures was not intelligence.

It was not determination.

It was opportunity.

That realisation changed the way I understood disability forever.

Over time, I found myself expressing the same thought again and again. Eventually, it became the guiding principle of my life. **Disability is not primarily physiological. It is societal.** The body may have limitations. But exclusion is created by society. A staircase disables a wheelchair user. A closed classroom door disables a child eager to learn. Low expectations disable far more people than weak muscles ever could. The greatest barriers are often invisible. They are built from prejudice. Fear. Ignorance. And the quiet assumption

that some lives matter less than others. That conviction was strengthened by many people I encountered over the years.

I remember meeting artists with neither arms nor legs who painted extraordinary works using only their mouths or their feet. Their creativity was breathtaking. What made their success possible was not the absence of disability. It was the presence of opportunity. I often thought of Wolfgang Schäuble in Germany. After surviving an assassination attempt, he spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Yet he became one of the most influential political leaders in modern German history, serving his country with distinction for decades. His wheelchair did not diminish his wisdom. It did not reduce his leadership. It did not lessen his contribution to society. These examples confirmed something I had long suspected: Human potential is astonishing. Given the right environment, people continually surpass the expectations placed upon them. The real tragedy is not disability. The real tragedy is wasted potential.

The more I reflected on these experiences, the more one question occupied my mind: What if there were a place where children with physical disabilities were no longer defined by what they could not do?

What if they were surrounded instead by people who helped them discover what they could do?

What if education became the bridge between limitation and possibility?

That question stayed with me for years. It accompanied me during my ministry. It followed me on every journey back to Nigeria. It returned in quiet moments of prayer. Little by little, what had begun as a question became a vision. And one day I realised that visions, if they are truly from God, eventually demand a response.

The time had come to stop asking what ought to be done. It was time to begin.

Chapter Four

When a Vision Found Its Shape

Visions are rarely born complete. More often, they begin as an uneasy conviction—a quiet voice that refuses to disappear. For years I carried such a conviction within me. I knew that something had to change for children and young people living with physical disabilities in my community. I simply did not yet know what form that change should take.

Should it be a rehabilitation centre? A vocational training programme? A scholarship fund? A boarding home? Every possibility seemed both promising and insufficient. The more I listened to families, the more I realised that their greatest need was not charity.

It was opportunity. Opportunity to learn. Opportunity to acquire skills. Opportunity to earn a living. Opportunity to regain confidence. Most importantly, opportunity to become active contributors to society rather than passive recipients of sympathy.

The answer, I gradually realised, was education.

Not education in the abstract. Education that prepares people for life. Education that enables young people to stand on their own feet—sometimes literally, but always figuratively. Around the year 2000, what had long existed as a personal conviction finally became a concrete commitment.

I knew I could not accomplish such a task alone. Neither could it be built on good intentions alone. A vision without people to share it remains only a dream. I was deeply blessed to have friends in Switzerland and Austria who believed that development should never consist merely of giving things to people. Like me, they believed in empowering people to shape their own future.

Together, we founded the **Verein Amokwe Nigeria (Switzerland)**—known simply as **VAN**. The association was not established because we possessed abundant resources. In fact, we had very little.

What we possessed was trust. Trust in one another. Trust in the people we hoped to serve. And trust that God blesses work carried out for the dignity of others.

From the very beginning, VAN understood itself as far more than a fundraising organisation. It became a community of friends. People with different professions, different backgrounds and different cultures united by one conviction:

Every human being deserves the chance to flourish.

A year later, in 2001, we established our Nigerian partner organisation, the **Chibugwu Amokwe Nigeria Foundation (CANF)**. That decision proved to be one of the wisest we ever made. Too many development initiatives fail because they remain dependent on people who live thousands of kilometres away. I wanted something different. I wanted ownership to remain where it belonged—with the local community.

CANF therefore became much more than an administrative structure. It became the living heart of the project in Nigeria. Its members understood the realities of our communities.

They knew the families. They spoke the language. They shared the culture. Above all, they understood that genuine development cannot be imported. It must grow from within.

Even with these foundations in place, one fundamental question remained. What exactly should we build?

The answer emerged gradually.

We decided to begin with vocational education. An old African proverb had always resonated deeply with me: *«If you give a hungry person a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime»*. I have always appreciated the wisdom of that saying. Yet over the years I came to realise that it contains an even deeper truth. Teaching someone to fish is not merely about acquiring a skill.

It is about restoring dignity.

It is about replacing dependence with confidence.

It is about enabling a person to become a giver rather than a receiver.

That became our guiding philosophy. Our first vocational programme focused on computer education. At the time, some people questioned the decision. Computers were still unfamiliar to many rural communities. Some thought we should concentrate exclusively on traditional trades. But I believed that the future would belong to those who could navigate both worlds—the traditional and the digital. If our young people were to compete in a rapidly changing society, they needed access to technologies that were transforming the world. Looking back today, I have never regretted that decision.

Hundreds of young people from Amokwe and neighbouring communities completed computer training through our programme. Many found employment. Others continued their education. Some discovered talents they never knew they possessed. Their success confirmed something I had believed from the beginning: Young people do not rise merely because opportunities exist. They rise because someone first believes they are capable of succeeding. Those early years demanded enormous patience. Progress came slowly. Resources were limited. Plans often had to be revised. Some ideas succeeded. Others did not. There were moments of frustration. Moments when the dream seemed far larger than our capacity.

Yet whenever discouragement threatened, I found myself returning to the story of my brother. If strangers had once refused to give up on him... How could I give up on children whose faces I knew?

Every small achievement strengthened our resolve. Every child who discovered confidence strengthened our hope. Every supporter who joined us reminded us that this vision belonged to many people. Without fully realising it, we were laying foundations for something much

larger than we had originally imagined. At that stage, I still believed we were building a vocational training centre. God, however, had already begun preparing us for something else.

It would take the story of three remarkable brothers to reveal what that "something else" would be. Only then did I understand that our original vision, important as it was, did not yet go far enough.

Chapter Five

When One Door Closed

By the early years of our project, the vocational training centre had begun to establish itself. Young people from Amokwe and neighbouring communities were enrolling in computer courses and other practical skills programmes, discovering abilities they had never had the opportunity to develop before. It was encouraging.

I believed we had found the right path.

But reality soon confronted us with questions we had not yet asked.

Among the first young people admitted to our hostel were three brothers whose story would profoundly influence the future of our work. All three lived with the same physical disability, which severely limited their mobility. Although the illness had affected each of them at different stages of childhood, the consequences were much the same. Simple tasks that other children took for granted required extraordinary effort. Their family lived under extremely difficult circumstances. Their father had lost his sight. Their mother carried almost the entire responsibility for raising the family. An older sister helped whenever she could, but the burden was overwhelming. Despite these challenges, the brothers possessed something that could not be taken from them: a desire to learn.

The eldest had successfully completed primary school. Like every other young person his age, he dreamed of continuing his education at secondary school. It was not an extraordinary dream. It was simply the dream of a boy who wanted the chance to build a future. Yet that dream appeared impossible.

At the time, my long-serving project coordinator, **Innocent Nwankwo**, who had stood beside the project with exceptional dedication from its earliest days, refused to give up. Together with one of the traditional rulers of Amokwe at the time, **Igwe G. C. Onyia**, he approached schools in search of one that would accept the young man. Eventually, a private

secondary school agreed to admit him. There was one condition. He could attend only as a day student. It was not the ideal solution, but it felt like a breakthrough.

For a brief moment, hope returned. Then, only a short time later, it disappeared again. The school's management withdrew its offer. The reason was as simple as it was heartbreaking. Several parents had threatened to remove their own children from the school if the young wheelchair user remained in the classroom. I have often reflected on that decision.

His academic ability was never questioned. His behaviour was never criticised. No one suggested that he lacked intelligence or discipline. His presence alone was considered unacceptable.

When I learned what had happened, I felt a deep sadness. Not only because another young person had been denied an education. But because I realised that his exclusion had very little to do with his disability. It had everything to do with society's perception of disability.

That moment became a turning point for me.

Until then, I had believed that vocational education was the next essential step for young people with disabilities. Now I understood that we had overlooked an even greater obstacle. If children were prevented from entering secondary school, they would never reach vocational training in the first place. The real barrier came much earlier. It began at the classroom door.

I found myself asking a question that would not leave me:

Why continue searching for schools willing to make exceptions... when we could create a school where no child would ever need an exception? A place where children with and without disabilities would learn together as a matter of course. A place where no teacher would have to explain why a wheelchair belonged in a classroom. A place where diversity would not be tolerated but welcomed. A place where every child would be judged not by physical limitations but by character, determination and potential.

That question changed everything.

Our vocational training centre was no longer enough. Its mission had to grow. What had begun as a centre for vocational skills would become something much more ambitious.

We would establish our own **Secondary School** - a **Comprehensive and Vocational Secondary School**.

Not because we had planned to build one. But because justice required it.

Looking back today, I realise that those three brothers probably never imagined the significance of their own story. They came to us seeking an opportunity. Instead, they became the reason a new generation of children would never again have to ask for permission simply to enter a classroom.