**TOGETHER TOWARDS TOMORROW: YES, I AM MY SISTER’S KEEPER!**

Keynote address at the EXSSA-UK Convention 2013

**by**

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An African proverb says: “If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together”. This proverb is self-explanatory.

Another African saying goes: “Hurry, hurry bus’ (burst) trossis (trousers)”! This proverb, on the other hand, strongly suggests that the “going quickly” of the first proverb might not be such a wise thing to do, compared to the “going far”.

Ladies and gentlemen, EXSSA sisters, it is for me a great honour and privilege to be accorded this opportunity, once again, to make a keynote address, at an august gathering of Sakerettes and our guests. The occasion this time is the 2nd annual convention of EXSSA-UK, one of the newest chapters of our great alumna association, Ex-Saker Students’ Association. I am particularly glad that the theme chosen for this year’s convention is “Together Towards Tomorrow”, which highlights the “going together” of our first African proverb cited above. We know we can always count on the wisdom of our African forebears.

I am Stella Anyangwe, née Nwigwe, graduating class of 1969 and student number 476. Although I graduated from Saker with the 4th batch, and when there had been no more than 200 students enrolled before that batch, my number (476) came about because I joined Saker in 1967with the 7th batch of form 1 foxes. Note that in Saker, female foxes are still foxes and not vixen, as the Queen’s English would name them. I was therefore technically a form 4 fox, and the form 5 seniors insisted on cutting my tail! Luckily, I had just returned home to Cameroon from Nigeria because of the Biafran war, and was as wild as any Biafran soldier or civil defense scout! The cutting of my old tail was therefore most unsuccessful indeed. I spent only two academic years in Saker, but that was enough to change my life.

I reminisce on my arrival and very short stay in Saker because the word “together” came to have a special meaning for me. When I arrived Saker one month late in the first term of form 4 in October 1967, my classmates had already selected their GCE “0” level subjects in form 3. I was coming into the GCE system from the West African School Certificate system, with very different syllabi, and I was totally lost! However, some of my form 4B classmates (the Majors) went out of their comfort zone to lend me their form 3 notes for the 10 papers that I registered for, and a few of them spent hours explaining some difficult and some new subjects to me. In their minds, it was an investment to help me study to pass the exams so that TOGETHER, we would raise the pass rate of our class. I did not disappoint them for I passed the 4 papers that I sat in form 4, and the 8 papers that I sat in form 5, passing in English language both years and thus raising the school’s pass rate. In those days, only those who passed the compulsory English language paper were considered as having “passed” GCE. A school’s results are based on the scores of ALL, and not just on the scores of a few. When it is said that Saker has 100% pass rate, it means that ALL who wrote the exams got equal to or more than the cutoff points considered a pass. A school could boast of a few students who made straight As in 10 papers, but if only 40% passed that year, that school is considered worse than the school that scored 100% pass, but where only 1 student got straight As in all papers. The overall pass rate does not indicate or dwell on how many students got all As. Of course, for each individual, the grades matter a lot, and excellence should be our goal. For the collective, however, encouraging everyone to pass, and supporting each other to do so, is the goal. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and we are all collectively weaker when we don’t work together to make our school and our association stronger.

Have you noted that there is no letter “i” in the word TEAM? This is because T-E-A-M stands for “TOGETHER EACH ACHIEVES MORE”. When we minimize “I” and “ME” and concentrate on “WE” and “US”, and work together, we do indeed go farther. The study of the dynamics of groups teaches us that when a group is formed, it goes through a natural process of 4 phases. The first is the phase of **“forming”** which is when the group comes together. Like our EXSSA group, we are of all ages from different backgrounds, batches, professions and disciplines, socio-cultural and economic strata. The great thing is that no one is forced to become a member of the group, and this voluntary membership is healthy indeed. The second phase of group dynamics is that of **“storming”.** Given our various differences cited above, and coupled with the differences of opinion and conviction, it is perfectly normal and healthy to disagree on many issues. The danger of storming is when acrimony, sectarianism, factionalism and outright jealousy cloud our judgment, and we become irrational. The healthy debate and dissent degenerate into personal attacks, mud-slinging and myopic reasoning, and the group comes dangerously close to the brink of disintegration. We know of many groups that either split or just fizzled out at this stage, which is but a natural phase in group dynamics. By the way, a marriage, especially an African one, is also the bringing together of two families, and goes through the same phases as other groups do. The third phase, after the phases of forming and storming, is that of **“norming”.** This is when the members of the group see beyond the differences and beyond their individual idiosyncrasies, and begin to tolerate and appreciate those very differences of opinion, considering them as strengths and not weaknesses. Members swallow their pride, become humble enough to apologize to each other for real or perceived slights, nip their jealousies and resentments in the bud, and begin to enjoy belonging to the group. Then, and only then, can the group progress to the fourth and last phase, which is that of **“PERFORMING”.** Very often, after the fourth phase, the members of the group themselves and the world at large are pleasantly surprised to note that not only has the group gone far together, they are starting to move quickly forward too. Working together is always a win-win story! Be not fooled, ladies and gentlemen, because it is understandably not always easy to accomplish, but it is definitely feasible.

The Saker Alumnae song (anthem) is a perfect sermon on togetherness. It states categorically: “be you coastal, midland, upland, we Saker girls are one…”. Note that it is not asking whether we Saker girls are one. It is making a statement, and we have to earn that assertion. When we sing the anthem, especially in front of guests, we are claiming loudly that we are together. Do we think of the words we sing, and more importantly, do we live by them? We can even extrapolate and sing:”be you doctor, lawyer, teacher, preacher, bayam sellam trader, unemployed housewife or single mother, we Saker girls are one….”.When the anthem was written, the biggest differences at home were linked to the politico-cultural divide of the day (coastal, midland, upland), and so it did not spell out the subtle, but sometimes glaring divide by educational level and social class. We must think of these too. Even as Sakerettes, how much do we associate with those who are not our classmates, our friends or “intis”, our tribesmen/women, our professional colleagues, or our church members? If we don’t, are we afraid of the perceived risk of them pulling us down to their level, or scared of the possibility of them achieving our level of success, and even surpassing us?

Whatever our fear is, it is infinitely better to have an LHU degree than a PHD degree. LHU being “Lift Him/Her Up” and PHD being “Pull Him/Her Down”!

Dear Sakerettes, now school is over and so let us put to practice what we were taught in Saker, and what we continue to sing till date “we Saker girls are one”. We can’t and should not even attempt to practice togetherness on our own strength. We must commit all our plans and actions to prayer, and ask for divine support. We must also strive to take concrete and practical steps to remain together. Sweet words without action will make us just like the rest of them. Sakerettes can and should make a difference, not only in Cameroon but the world over. That difference begins with each one of us! Let us progress hand in hand together, lifting each other up towards a better tomorrow. As our great EXSSA anthem states, “with the power of God almighty, we’ll try to face the world, for unity and sisterhood we Saker students strive”.

Yes, I am my sister’s keeper! I am happy to be my sister’s keeper. We all should continue to be our sisters’ keeper, so that we can strive to work successfully together towards a better tomorrow.

Thank you and God bless.