

*While writing my plans for the next year in my Union Jack design notebook, I stop to reminisce about all that has transpired this year, and I smile as I recall some key moments.*

Shortly after my convocation from the university, I travelled on vacation. Time flew by and I spent my weeks jetting from one city to the next, visiting relatives, sightseeing, shopping and generally having a great holiday. During that period, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) portal opened up for registration, and I tried to register from outside the country but it was proving difficult. Reluctant to conclude my holiday but desperate to register on time to get my chosen selection of states, I began an inquiry into whether there was a way to properly register for the scheme from outside the country.

Due to an unsuccessful and fruitless search, I quickly ended my vacation and returned home to Nigeria where on arrival in Lagos, I raced to a cyber café close to home to complete the process. While I was being attended to, everyone there kept questioning my lateness in registering. “Ah ah! You are just registering? All the good states would be gone oh. Why did you not come since?” To corroborate their point, I was the only person undertaking the registration at the cyber cafe while I was there. In selecting my choice of states, I picked Delta, Kano, Benue and Oyo states respectively, with Oyo state being my dream service state due to its proximity to Lagos where I resided. My sister had served in a similar area, and she had had the best year making memories with new friends. She was even slightly unenthusiastic about returning home after the service year. Recently, she attended the wedding ceremony of one of these friends. Thus, I could see myself in Ibadan, Oyo state’s capital, in my khaki uniform, living the life she had painted with her words and recounts of her experiences. After graduation up till when I was eventually called up for service, I researched NYSC, read stories, blogs, and articles and absorbed as much information as I could. It was from those sources I deduced that people were usually posted to serve in one of the states they had selected, except if they “worked” it. So I was fairly confident that I had a chance of being sent to Oyo state.

The D-day came and I was put in the next stream. Thus, while all my group chats were being bombarded with pictures and complaints about camp, friends and soldiers, I was fuming at home about the audacity of NYSC to put me in the next stream even after I literally ran back

from my holiday to register. I am unsure how they were supposed to know that, but I did not care- I was upset about not serving with friends and colleagues from school.

Christmas passed and the New Year began. In the third week of January, my posting finally came through. My excitement quickly faded into disappointment as I logged into my portal and saw Ebonyi state. I initially thought it was a mistake so I waited a few hours, reopened the portal and refreshed the page a few times. It was not a mistake. Before this time, all I knew about Ebonyi state were two things: the capital, as sung in the states and capitals song- *Ebonyi- Abakaliki*, and that they produced local rice because we ate Abakaliki rice at home. Ebonyi state was not a topic that entered frequent conversation, so I was completely unfamiliar and uninformed about it.

Only a few people were posted to Ebonyi in my stream, so because of that, we were merged with two other eastern states. This led me to complete the mandatory three-week orientation camp at Awgu, Enugu state. I landed at Akanu Ibiam International Airport, Enugu, a day before camp and proceeded to Awgu the next day. Although having traversed almost all the states in Western Nigeria and some in the South and North, this was my first time in the Eastern part of Nigeria.

The first thing I noticed about Enugu was the red sand and the hilly terrain extending into the distance. It brought a feeling of nostalgia as I remembered a similar place from an earlier time in my life. This was when my paternal grandfather was alive, and my extended family would come from far and near to celebrate Christmas together in Benin City. During these holidays we the younger cousins would have to bathe in a basin beside the well in the central courtyard of the house because the adults felt we were not wise enough to manoeuvre the dilapidated bathing stall attached to the mud kitchen. Personally, I had no issues with bathing in the basin because I never liked the stall, with its rotting wooden door and its “too close for comfort” water closet. Our food would be served on a brown raffia mat laid on the elevated and shaded corridor facing the courtyard, each individual to their own plastic plate of boiled yams or boiled plantains and owo soup- a palm oil-based soup- straight from the moulded mud and firewood stove. To date, this is one of my favourite meals, not only because of its delicious taste but because of the wholesome memories associated with it. The adolescent cousins would purchase hand-held sparklers for us to light at night and watch us dance

around our street in Benin, waving our fiery treasure around till it burned out and extinguished itself. Everywhere, people would wish each other 'Merry Christmas'! Or shout 'Happy Celebration! in the local dialect, and food and drinks would rain in abundance, with neighbours dropping in to salute our family.

The second thing I thought about Enugu was how serene and idyllic the place was. For someone coming from Lagos with its never-ending traffic, streets overrun with filth, dense population and constant state of motion, this was a deviation from what I was used to.

I got to camp in the afternoon of the next day. If I thought Enugu City was hilly, then Awgu camp was a mountain range. From the parade ground where we would later carry out all our physical activities to my assigned hostel at the rear of the compound was a long walk up a steep hill. We were given a few sets of uniform- white shorts, shirts, the NYSC khaki, socks, a pair of white trainers and a pair of imitation combat boots we called jungle boots. Camp began, and for three weeks I was subjected to more bodily stress than I had ever encountered.

We would be woken up at 4 a.m. by the blast of a bugle, and we were expected to be out and on the assembly ground within the next 30 minutes. During those cold harmattan mornings when the dry Sahara desert breeze blows at its finest and the motivation to leave the warmth of your bed is utterly absent, this felt like torture. Failure to do so however would have us being chased out by strict female soldiers. We would have an assembly where the blast of the bugle signified a mandatory moment of silence, followed by morning exercises. Breakfast would come after, but I avoided most meals due to how unappealing I found them, even though I tried. Afterwards, we would either return to the parade ground or listen to gruelling lectures for the next five hours. On my second day in camp after an extremely rigorous session of drills under the scorching sun, I nearly passed out in exhaustion. Everything was spinning and I just wanted it to stop. A soldier saw me sprawled on the ground without a care in the world and good man that he was, he approached me, asked me if I was alright and hurriedly led me by the hand to a shaded area of the mammy market where he purchased water for me and ensured I was fine before leaving me and continuing on his way. By the third week of constant physical exercise, to my pleasant surprise, I was running from my hostel at a higher elevation to the market closer to the entrance down below.

Apart from all the exercises, I also had the opportunity to meet various people with a plethora of behaviours and beliefs. Different ideologies, ethnic backgrounds, upbringings and habits abounded in the camp. My hostel was a temporary domicile to about a hundred girls including me, all from different parts of the nation. During our free time while in the hostel, a slew of languages could be heard, with the majority of them being shouted across the room. English, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Ibibio and Pidgin English, were some of the languages that I could identify. Our hostel governor, a fellow corp member, spoke Pidgin English expertly. Sometimes I would lean over the edge of my bed, with the palm of my hand cradling my chin, and watch her in wonder as the words formed and flew out of her mouth in quick succession because she was constantly shouting or making one announcement or the other.

Although we were made to do exercises, I managed to escape drills after some time. In camp we were divided into groups for ease of management. The soldiers assigned to my group concluded that I was inept at marching, volleyball or any other sporting activity after multiple unsuccessful tries to get me to participate. So along with some other outliers, I was relegated to sitting down under the trees while the “expert marchers” practised in the dust under the hot sun. A particular incident comes to mind where this young man who was part of the marchers in my group caught a glimpse of those of us sitting under the tree that day, and he began to feign a much-exaggerated limp. A soldier noticed the limp and dismissed him to join us under the trees. In a twinkle of an eye, this “limp” disappeared and he ran with glee to sit down, much to the chagrin of the soldier. At the end of orientation camp, there was a passing out parade where our letters indicating our posting organizations were handed to us. And there began my one year of national service.

After almost two weeks of traipsing around the state of Ebonyi and navigating new routes, I finally got approval to work at the office. Abakaliki City in Ebonyi state paled in comparison to the level of City life I was used to in Lagos. In Lagos, I am constantly in a hurry, always rushing to beat the traffic and arrive at my destination in time. The people of Ebonyi state live a quiet life void of the hustle and bustle of City life. On the first day, I got to the office where I was posted as early as 8 a.m. I had to wait outside the complex, which was open but barely occupied, till about 9:30 a.m. when the other workers began to trickle in for work. At the office, I met two other male corp members. I came as a surprise to quite a number of workers due to my choice of profession. While there were women there in other departments, I was

the only female architect. I knew a lot of women in architecture and as such did not think anything about it, but seeing their surprised reactions and responses made me conclude that it must be a rarity for most of them. I also initially had to dissuade wrong opinions and beliefs that women could not be technically inclined professionals.

If someone had told me that I would be a regular motorcycle patron, I would have rolled my eyes at them, kissed my teeth, and begun a lecture on the dangers of riding on a motorcycle. I moved around Abakaliki City via commercial buses and tricycles. With time, motorcycles became my go-to if tricycles or buses were not available. Previously, I would have favoured trekking to my destination if they were the only option. However, as the saying goes, overfamiliarity breeds contempt; I felt I had mastered being a passenger on a motorcycle and I became careless. One day, while dismounting from it, I failed to remember that the motorcycle's exhaust at its lower side would be hot and momentarily rested my calf on it. The searing pain I experienced is forever imprinted on my memory. I received a second-degree burn which with time, healed, but left a scar that serves as a reminder of my carelessness.

*Right now, in the last month, I await the official announcement by NYSC about the passing out parade where we will be issued our certificates, after which I will officially have concluded my service year. I realize how much I have grown and how much this year has reformed me. I have become more empathetic, having lived in a community that is completely different from what I usually encounter. My grasp of the Igbo language improved, and I can proudly say that I can participate in an average Igbo-English conversation, with someone else speaking the Igbo and me responding in "Engligbo"- Igbo with large chunks of English. My Pidgin English also improved, and I travelled and visited other states in the East. I have also learnt to be more prudent but not afraid to spoil myself when I feel I deserve it. In the beginning, I was constantly getting duped by transporters due to my lack of knowledge of their pricing patterns, but as time went on and I got accustomed to their routes and methods, this ceased. I witnessed both palm oil and cassava flakes production processes. Before this year, I had never seen cassava before, even though I knew that it is the raw material from which several foods are obtained. I also got to experience Igbo cuisine as this was my first time seeing many of the foods I got to try during the year. I observed the differences in the preparation of familiar meals; for instance, I learnt about using cassava to thicken soup. I did not make as many friends as I had envisioned, but I met some amazing people, from*

*fellow corp members to residents of the state, and these people contributed to my experiences and made my stay worthwhile.*

*Getting posted to and residing for a year in the East is an experience I will always recall. I believe everything happens for a reason, and that travelling and experiencing other cultures makes one see from the perspective of others and appreciate the diversity that exists in humanity.*

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