

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



In my column, titled, "Volunteers in Nigeria (Sept. 24, 2001)", I promised that from then to the end of the international year of the volunteers, I would highlight samples of the work of volunteers in Nigeria. Today, my focus is on Junior Achievement In Nigeria, one of the non-profit non-governmental, volunteers-based organizations in Nigeria with international affiliations. Junior Achievement was founded in Massachusetts, USA 1919 and is now present in 112 countries. Its mission is to inspire and educate young people to understand and value the role of business in improving their lives and communities. The main vehicle for achieving its goal is a series of economic education programmes that are delivered in schools to develop attitudes and skills necessary for personal success and social responsibility.

How did Junior Achievement come to Nigeria? Through the initiative and commitment of a young high achiever, Simisola Sanni, an old girl of Queen's College, Lagos. Simisola went to the US in 1993 for her Ivy League university education (Economics and English at Mount Holyoke College). She interned in the office of the Governor of New York and at Essence magazine, then began her career as an investment banker in New York with Goldman Sachs. There she discovered Junior Achievement because Goldman Sachs is one of its biggest funders. She volunteers as a teacher on J.A.'s programme and decided that this was an organization that was needed in Nigeria. Not that Nigerians are not great entrepreneurs but because J.A. teaches civics, ethics, and responsible leadership.

But where would she find the volunteers to go into the primary and secondary schools and teach the children? Nigerians don't volunteer outside of their village/town. She was warned. Well, she decided to take a leave from Goldman Sachs and see whether she would find people who share her enthusiasm and help her set up J.A. in Nigeria. It was 1999, a promising time with the return of democracy which encouraged J.A. members in New York. Simisola sought to replicate the American J.A. model of a professional, non-profit, non-governmental organization primarily funded by the private sector using volunteers to teach its programme.

Simisola Sanni, very articulate, well focused and highly persuasive, succeeded in recruiting a major corporation and business to support J.A. in Nigeria. She started with the American companies already familiar with or even involved with J.A., in the U.S such as Chevron, Coca Cola, Citibank, Ford Foundation and with them on board, was able to secure the backing of UBA, First Bank, Accenture, British Airways and others. The support was not just financial but in kind

JAN volunteers in Nigeria

— office space (at UBA Marina), computers etc. which means that the bulk of funds raised can go directly to the programmes. Once Sanni had got JAN established, she decided to resign from Goldman Sachs. Based on her own experience as a J.A. volunteer in the US, she was able to motivate the pioneer volunteers. In the two years it started, JAN has recruited more than 200 Nigeria volunteers and several foreigners to teach its programmes. It has also formed a partnership with the British Council, FATE Foundation, Lagos Business Schools, among others,

JAN's programme begins with the primary schools, teaching about the school as a community, extending to

declaring, "This is probably the happiest part of my secondary school life."

JAN has produced teaching programmes/kits/aids/for the school children and also more sophisticated material at the tertiary level for National Youth Service Corp members. That programme is Ventures in Management (VIMP) which is essentially a "mini-MBA" for 12-weeks where business cases are taught by volunteer lecturers from the Lagos Business School and chief executive of leading businesses. The participants act as consultants, engaging in intensive interaction, sometimes up all night, devising strategies and solutions by the end of the programme. JAN also plans to start corporate internships for university students.

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the suburb, then to the city. JAN operates a sports programme with the British Council, Community Action Through Sport (CATS), with volunteers coaching, organization team refereeing etc. The primary school children are taught what money is, what a business is and how to run it. In the maiden issue of the JAN newsletter, Harness Jan 2001, a primary school child reports they were taught how money moves from one place to another and how to set up a business of their own, such as the production of doughnuts. "After the lesson, Mr Wilcox (volunteer) gave us a real doughnut?"

The volunteer referred to Mr Wilcox, who is the Managing Director of Chevron Nigeria Ltd. This is another dimension introduced by JAN, getting the executives to interact with kids in the classrooms at schools all over Lagos and benefiting from the interaction.

At the secondary school level, volunteers teach personal economics and the economics of staying in school. There are also programmes where a group of students write a business plan, conduct market research to find out what their fellow students, teachers, staff, local people will buy before starting the business. After fifteen weeks, during which the volunteers monitor the business, offer advice and support, the students learn how to liquidate the business and share the profit or give the profit. A school student was quoted in Harness as

The two years of JAN'S existence have been very successful, and the numbers of students reached are increasing as are the numbers of volunteer teachers. Sanni emphasizes the importance of civics and ethics in an interview with Business Confidential, Aug 7, 2001: "By the time you've gone through twenty years of economics, civics and ethics, you're a seasoned leader. That's the whole reason I'm in it. To build our leaders from the cradle and you're on the right path."

The British Council endorses Sanni's work in JAN. "We heartily recommend JAN to anyone with an interest in developing the leadership potential of young people (Harness No 2)."

Apropos civics and ethics, a relevant case study follows: "Once upon a time somewhere in a village, a doctor was called to the house of a poor shoemaker whose wife was seriously ill. The shoemaker begged: 'Please doctor, save her, I'll pay you anything, even if I sell everything I own.'"

The doctor asked shrewdly: "What if your wife dies?"

The desperate husband cried, 'I'll pay you whether you cure her or kill her.'

The doctor treated the woman but a week later she died. The doctor sent the shoemaker a huge bill. The shoemaker insisted they go to a village elder to discuss the bill. The elders asked the doctor, "what was your agreement with the shoemaker?"

The doctor answered: "He agreed to pay me for treating his wife whether I cured or killed her."

"Did you cure her?"

'No,' admitted the doctor.

"Did you kill her, asked the elder?"

"Certainly not," retorted the doctor.

"Then (pronounced the elders). Under what contract are you claiming your fee?"