

Keynote Address
To the Ofori Panin Secondary School
(OPASS) Alumni Association of
North America
6th Annual Reunion In Voorhees, NJ
June 18, 2011

Speaker
Dr. Godfried A. Arthur
Class of 1977

Mr. President, Hon. Deputy Minister of Agriculture of the Republic Of Ghana, Nii Amasah Namoale, Invited Guests, Mpaninfo, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I feel honored to stand before you tonight to deliver the keynote address at this function.

First of all, let me acknowledge the presence here tonight of the Honorable Deputy Minister, Nii Amasah for gracing this occasion. You are warmly welcome, honorable.

I thank all members of the association for doing this in the name of Ofori Panin Secondary School, Great OPASS. All of you who have gathered here tonight for the 2011 annual reunion here in Voorhees New Jersey, I say a big thank you. I salute you all for leaving your cozy homes, your jobs, your families and your friends to join us here. Be assured that it is not wasted time and effort. We are here to honor our school and alma mater, share ideas, meet friends, and above all, have fun. Thank you Mrs. Dorothy Appiah for your glowing introduction.

Please let me assure you that I do not feel entitled to stand before you tonight because of my qualifications or any of the generous accolades heaped upon me by Mrs. Appiah, which I'm certain I do not deserve; I stand before you today because I am a humble small-town boy, who is proud to call Ghana my country, and OPASS my alma mater. I am a typical Opassian from humble beginnings who seized the opportunities OPASS offered and worked hard toward my goals. I am one of you, and together, we have common objectives tonight: To reflect, and to renew our commitment to Ofori Panin Secondary School, and our country.

You see, we Opassians were not known for students from rich homes and big cities. We prided ourselves in being from small towns and villages in and around Tafo and Kukurantumi, like Osiem, Bunso, Asamang, Kwabeng, Asiakwa, Maase, Anyinasin, Asafo, Apedwa, and Begoro. This was the Akyem foundation of the school. We also had strong contingents from the Akwapim Ridge, Kwahu Ridge, Yilo and Manya Krobo. Smaller contingents came from far and wide like the Volta Region, Ashanti Region and the North, but a common theme was that most of us were from humble homes and villages. If you came from Koforidua, Accra, Kumasi, Ho, or Cape Coast, you were out of this world for us.

I still remember my first day in School in 1972, when my mother deposited me on the vast OPASS campus, at least so it seemed to a 12-year old small-town boy, and basically left me there. Of course I was not alone, there were other little boys and girls, 11, 12, 13, and 14-year olds, but the fact was that we all felt so lost and scared that we could barely look each other in the eye. We also had not so typical form one students who, to us, were so old that, in time, we gave them names like Paapa, Abusua Panin (Abusua for short), and Wonana. Of course, the seniors looked ancient with their beards and mustaches. Wonana was my favorite, when we were in form one.

In our first inter-house athletic meet, he beat the school's 100 meters champion who had held the school, zonal, and regional records in 100 and 200 meter sprints for many years. Some awesome 12-year old indeed. Of course, all the form 1 students were rooting for Wonana. Except me. The school and regional champion was my brother!!

I remember "Mother Doh and Father Doh". These were names we gave two unfortunate classmates of mine in Form 2. In reality, Father Doh and Mother Doh were names the music teacher and choir master, Mr. Amoyaw, taught us on the musical scale. Iconic Mr. Amoyaw, with his flute in hand, always started his first lessons to new form one students with the musical scale. He would blow the "doh, rey, mee....doh." of the musical scale, and teach us "Father doh" and "Mother doh" of the octave.

So when one day one of my friends fell asleep at prep and inadvertently let off wind which sounded like "Father doh", that became his name. Another time, this time a female classmate, had a similar experience, hers sounding like "Mother doh". So "Mother doh", her name became. That is how come we had both "Father doh" and "Mother doh" in our class in Form 2.

By form 3 we had arrived! We had acquired names like, Pinto (this speaker), Diza, Destroyer, and Walata. In Form 4 and Form 5, I felt proud to say "I'm in 4 Science", clutching "Abott" to my chest with pride as if my life depended on it. In my time there were also "Arts", "Business", and "General" streams too. A friend of mine, Mike, who was also in "4 Science" used to tease our mates in "4 General" saying; "They don't know where they are going!"

I remember some of our seniors too, like Senior Oko Nai, who was lucky enough to have a popular bread spread named after him. School legend has it that when Oko was in form one, he loved the peanut butter spread so much, he used to over-indulge. He would spread it so thick on his bread that, it would spill all over his hands, and then soon enough, into his clothing, his hair, and everywhere.

In time, everybody started calling the peanut butter, "Oko Nai". "Hey, pass me the Oko Nai". "Jack, take it easy on the Oko Nai" were common phrases at the dining hall. At some point, Oko decided to do something about it. He went straight to Mr. S. T. Ampofo (aka 'Oga'), the then Headmaster, and blurted before thinking, "Master, everybody is calling me Oko Nai!" 'Oga' then asked him, "But what is your name". Oko replied, "Oko Nai". I bet that to-date, the headmaster never understood what Oko's concerns were. Well, the rest is history, and peanut butter (aka groundnut paste) has since had the distinguished name, "Oko Nai" in Ofori Panin Secondary School.

I remember some of those who came after us too, like Honorable Nii Amasah, who I'm proud to call my contemporary and friend, Kurata, Castro, and Washigoro. I remember some culinary specials on our school menu too, like "Red Red" (aka "Lucky Lips"), "Akua", Nkyenkye, "Carcass" and "Motorway".

I remember T-Junction, our lovers' lane, and "Chan-Chan" - the name we gave to records night. There were so many stories from T-Junction that I don't care to remember or recount here. After all, I never patronized T-Junction. I remember being teased that I always used to pass T-Junction like an express train at Tontro or Amansamang-at full speed and no stopping, no waiting, and no standing.

We had great teachers and great non-academic staff. Mistert S.T. Ampofo (aka Oga), Twum-Danso (aka Atta Cigar), R.S. Yeboah (aka, Mobutu), Aninfeng, Larbi, Oppong-Antwi, Antwi-Darko, Gavor, Saweh, Nanor, Asiedu, Mintah, Mrs. Asomaning, and Mrs. Asare-Nyarko, to name a few. These fine teachers ensured we made something of our time in school. By far my most interesting teacher was Mr. Aglikpa, my Bible Knowledge teacher. Mr. Aglikpa had a Bible quotation for every situation and every student. Mr. Aglikpa would bring test scores to class and proceed to give out the sheets or notebooks. He would call out each of us by name, mention your score, and give a bible quote that fits you perfectly.

To the well-behaved, good student: Mr. Aglikpa would say, "John Doe. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Score; 9/10". To the struggling but studious student, he would say, "Jane Average. Ask, and ye shall be given; knock, and ye shall be opened; seek, and ye shall find. Score; 6/10!" Now my friend Mike was very good academically, but he was also one of those students who would hide behind a teacher and make gestures and facial expressions to draw a laugh. What we would call, a rascal. Obviously he was never Mr. Aglikpa's favorite. Mr. Aglikpa would call; "Mike. By their deeds they shall be known. 3/10!"

One day, Mr. Aglikpa stormed into class, furious and breathing fire. He had a large pile of note books under his arms. He called out Mike and said, "You saw me struggling with a heavy pile of books and didn't offer to help. Did you want me to carry them on my ugly head?" Now, Mr. Aglikpa did not exactly have a Cassanova's head. Mike looked at him with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, and said with all the innocence he could muster, "No, Master. I didn't want you to carry the books on your ugly head!!" My favorite non-teaching staff was called Mr. Apiu, who had been the school janitor for ever. Ageless Apiu was the most dedicated worker I have known either side of Opass. He went about his duties cleaning all bathrooms and toilets in the school with dignity, pushing his wheel barrow before him, his brooms, brushes and mops laid out neatly in the wheel barrow. My friend Mike, used to point at him in jest, and say. "*Oh Apiu, wammo ne bra yie!*"

The truth is we the boys, with our wild imagination and raging hormones were jealous of Apiu. You see, Apiu was the only male on campus, staff or student, who could go to the girls' bathrooms without fear or favor. We heard in the classrooms that Apiu could go about his job with a row of girls under the shower, and Apiu would not bat an eye. We would have loved to be in Apiu's shoes. If wishes were horses....

But, of course, we had school to complete. After 5 years of hard work and rollicking time, I left OPASS as an accomplished young man ready to face my destiny. The school had transformed me from a scared small-town boy into a confident young man. I don't know about you, but OPASS had taught me to work hard, aim high, believe in myself, enjoy life's moments, and, above all, to "Think and Serve". "Dwen Na Som". That was our motto. Think and serve. When I was a kid, I found that choice of motto curious, to put it mildly. "Couldn't our founders think of something better", I thought. When other schools had cool mottos like:

Omnia Vincit Labor (Labor conquers all), so goes St. Augustine's School's motto;

or,

Vel Primus Vel Cum Primis (The best or among the best), Adisadel School's motto:

And listen to this one,

In Lumine Tuo Videbimus Lumen (In thy light we shall see light). Presbyterian Boys Secondary School, my Sixth-form school.

Heck, even Abuakwa State College (Abusco) had a cool motto: "Susubiribi".

Surely, our founders could have done better? But, as I grew older, it became clear to me that the beauty of our school motto was in its simplicity; a gentle call to think and serve. Ladies and gentlemen, our school motto does not force you to serve. It does not obligate you to serve. It doesn't even castigate you for choosing not to serve. What the motto does is acknowledge your freedom of thought, and your freedom of choice. It is a gentle admonition to all who pass through its gates to think. And serve, if they may. One state here in the US, New Hampshire, has for its motto, "Live free or die!". You have no choice here, folks. No freedom here to think, and decide if you want to live free or not. Just do it! Or, die!!

Our motto, "Think and serve", does not put you in such a spot. It completely eliminates any passion to degrade your freedom of choice. Now, my question to us all is: What have we all done about that?

Since I have been in the US, I have seen 3 categories of Ghanaians here in the US.

The first group consists of a small group of Ghanaians who, either by their perceived importance or self-glorified status, has decided that they have nothing to do with Ghana or anything Ghanaian. They say things like, "Ghanaians are trouble"; "I don't deal with Ghanaians". To those people, I say thank you. I wish you luck. May your road be straight. My question is not directed at you. Those people are probably not here, anyway.

There is another small group who has been forced by circumstances to live in the margins. They avoid fellow Ghanaians. They do not pick calls from home, and haven't been home for 20 years. And this is not by choice. To these types, my BK teacher would have quoted, "The soul is willing, but the body is weak". I do not mock these types, but perhaps, we should leave them alone to sort themselves out. My question is not directed at them either. Most of us belong to the third group, the vast majority, who proudly identify ourselves as Ghanaians. We go to Ghanaian functions in our home states. We go home when finances allow, and we have phone conversations with family and friends back home frequently. If you belong to this group, which I hope applies to all of us gathered here, my question applies to you. What have we done about our school's gentle call to "Think and Serve"?

It saddens me when I hear people return from Ghana and declare,

"Ghana paa de, woko Korle-Bu na wonni sika a wobewu oo".

Or, they see their village primary school and come out declaring that the children are doomed, forgetting that they passed through the same school themselves. I am confident we've all heard it over and over again. What did you do about it, my friends? Surely you don't expect the government to replace every classroom chair and table in the country? While you live here and pay taxes to the US government, you surely don't expect the government of Ghana to satisfy all your newly-acquired tastes, with all due respect?

To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, "are you asking what your country can do for you, or you are asking what you can do for your country? Are you asking what you can do for your school, be it Ofori Panin Secondary School, Maase Methodist Primary, or Asiakwa Presby Middle?

Ladies and gentlemen, let us all gathered here tonight reflect on how we can make a difference. Be involved. Help to organize activities concerning your school. By our being here we have all passed this test. Mr. Aglikpa would have given us 6/10 and said, "Seek, and ye shall find".

But we need to get 9/10. We need to do more. Let us aggressively network. Call your classmates. Get the phone numbers of other classmates and call them too. Use e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, whatever. Form a year group like the 1979 year group has done, and we applaud them. Occasionally, often even, you will stumble on a mate who will snub you or would want nothing to do with the school or Ghana. That is okay, wish them well and continue calling. Do not stop.

Harriet Tubman was a 19th century slave who escaped slavery in Maryland to Philadelphia. She went back several times to rescue other slaves from down south to channel them to safety up north. She never stopped although there was a price on her head. Her piece of advice to the slaves she channeled to freedom via the so-called

Underground Railroad was, (and this was quoted by Hillary Clinton during the Democratic National Convention in 2008):

“If you hear the dogs, keep going.

If you see their torches, keep going.

If they are shouting after you, keep going.

Keep going, don't ever stop”.

My friends, don't stop calling just because one or two self-absorbed people snubbed you, or even said you were wasting your time? Like Harriet Tubman and her charges, just keep going. Don't ever stop!! Donate money. Nothing is too much or too little. Oh, so you don't have money? Welcome to the club. You belong to the majority, and you are in good company too. Abraham Lincoln once said, “God must have loved the common man. He made so many of them”.

The other time, I was reading a New York Times article on Ghanaian funerals in New York. I was humbled by our penchant to go to excesses when it comes to funerals. That same person who said they do not have money for their old school project will do whatever it takes to attend that funeral, even if they did not know who was dead.

Somehow, our senses of priority, as Ghanaians, rank the dead before the living. I am not condemning you if you are given to such thinking, but surely, you can also spare a thought for those little kids in your old school. They are in the same situation we were in just a few years ago. Remember?

Or, you can donate your time. Imagine how a 15 year old would feel if they found you in their classroom sharing your knowledge with them. I am not asking you to go teach them the molecular theory of matter, but what about something like,

A typical working day in America, or Choosing a career, or Starting a business?

Or, just visit the school for an hour and interact with staff and students and discuss the school's needs, plans, or progress. I can assure you, any time spent in the school is time well-spent.

Or, brainstorm an idea. You will be surprised how many people are looking for an opportunity to help but can't think of how. Someone can seize on your idea and do something great to benefit your school in one way or the other.

Did you know that Facebook started as an idea by two twin brothers in school? Someone else took the idea to town, and the rest is history. Organize an event to benefit the school: An evening dinner, for example, where proceeds go directly to benefit your school. We are lucky tonight to have the Honorable Deputy Minister here,

who is one of our own. Perhaps between now and the Golden Jubilee in November, a high level dinner dance to benefit OPASS an idea I respectfully ask the honorable Deputy Minister to consider as a priority when he returns home. Honorable minister, you can sell the idea to your fellow ministers and invite them to help us. You can even sell it to them so they can do the same for their own schools. This speaker will be in Ghana between late July and mid-August. If your dinner dance happens while I'm in town, you can count me in.

To conclude, my friends, let us seize this opportunity to renew our promise to our dear school and homeland. Let us all reflect on ways we can serve our alma mater. As President Obama has said time and time again, "This is our moment, this is our time". Old or young, rich or poor, there is a role for you, your money, your time, or your ideas. We need you, no matter how small you think you are. If there is anything to remember from this keynote, it is this story I am going to share with you:

A little boy came to his father crying with the news that his turtle had died. His father looked at the turtle in his son's hands and thought fast. "I know", he said, "We'll invite all your friends over and have a big funeral. We'll dig a little grave in the backyard and make a little coffin, and we'll have a parade. We'll all make great speeches over dead Shelby here, and we'll....." Just then the father noticed that the turtle was moving. "Hey, son" he said, "Shelby is not dead after all!"

The little boy looked at the now active animal, and with disappointment in his eyes, looked up at his father, winked at him and said, "Let's kill him!!"

The take home here, folks, is you can turn any seemingly hopeless situation into an attractive one if you put your mind to it. Anything you can do to help your school or country is not as hopeless as you think.

Be positive. Start small. Remain modest always. But think big.

We need you. Your school needs you. Your country needs you.

Thank you and God bless you.

Dr. Godfried Arthur belongs to the class of 1977.

He worked in various hospitals in Ghana as a physician, obstetrician and gynecological surgeon for 16 years prior to relocating to the US.

Notably, he has worked at Bolgatanga Regional Hospital, War Memorial Hospital in Navorongo, St. Dominic Hospital in Akwatia, St. Dominic Hospital in Berekum, and Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra.

He currently lives and practices medicine in Wisconsin, USA.