

## Living with Blindness: A new life experience of Abibi Abioseh Lahai

**Primary Reader:** Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs

**Message:** Challenges faced by persons affected by blindness in later years

### **Introduction**

I am an organiser of sports for schools and colleges in the Ministry of Education at the Inspectorate office, Kenema, Eastern Sierra Leone. In 2008, I was involved in an accident where I sustained injuries on my right eye that eventually affected my left eye. After a period of six months of treatment, I was informed by an eye surgeon specialist that my eye condition was irreversible and was therefore declared blind.

As a result of my blindness, I was transferred from the capital city of Freetown into the provinces as a regional sports organiser presently residing in Kenema. To be very candid, I was not happy about the transfer and saw it as a discrimination against me as a blind person. Consequently, my wife refused to join me in Kenema and stayed in Freetown, thus abandoning me. It was a very sad moment for me since I had no one close to support me.

When I arrived in Kenema, the first day at the office was a moment I will never forget. No official introduction was made to my new colleagues, no office space was allocated to me and it was a surprise to see a blind person reporting for duty. My responsibility was to organise, supervise the teaching and learning of physical health education in schools and colleges. In spite of the new posting and negative attitudes at the workplace, I carried out my assigned roles and both teachers and pupils were surprised to see a blind man from the Ministry supervising their games, teach practical lessons in volley ball, soccer and athletics.

Within the family, I assumed things were going to be better for I thought they would be empathetic to my blindness and give me preferential care but to my dismay I was not considered in decision making, no guide was provided to aid my mobility, and my family members were not impressed even with my level of training and employment.

Having gone through these frustrations, I decided to register with the Sierra Leone Association of the Blind (SLAB) in Kenema District. My association with SLAB revitalised my confidence and dignity. In SLAB, I came across Mr Kabakeh Noah, manager of the Sierra Leone Community Based Rehabilitation Programme and Mrs Emma Parker, Director of the Sierra Leone Association of the Blind who have given me maximum courage to show that all is not lost. I was very active in promoting SLAB and within a short time the Kenema district branch of SLAB had opened a bank account and also registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare. A revolving microfinance loan scheme was introduced for members, a two acre swamp was cultivated for rice production and a local musical set was purchased and is usually played during occasions such as naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals.

In December 2011, I organised a sports meet for the blind, polio survivors and amputees in Kenema Township at the city field. This helped to change perception on issues of persons with disabilities in terms of sports. A copy of this sporting event is on the website of .....

To this end, my advice to adults who become disabled in later years is not to lose hope but be ready to conquer the challenges at all times with courage, determination and belief in the Lord Almighty.

There should be acceptance by employers and colleagues that even though one is blind, they should know that his capabilities to work are not disabled and he should be given opportunities and responsibilities at the work place to work and be accepted and respected.

The family should also respect him as a father and husband because nothing changes because of loss of sight. There should be respect, acceptance and counselling for all family members in order for all to cope with the situation and support each other.

Disability is not inability

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