**AUTISM**

**"Looking Beyond Impossibilities – A Family’s Story of Struggle and Triumph”**

Edem was born on 26th August 2006. We gave him all his childhood vaccinations at the suggested dates, including his MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella) at 13 months. Edem was a happy, contented baby. He met his developmental milestones and crawled, babbled and generally delighted those around him. By the age of 15 months, Edem had started to combine 2 and 3 words. It was at this time, I had a car accident and was hospitalized. I came home after 10 days but was wearing a halo brace (I had broken my neck) and was unable to care for Edem. We had to employ a Nanny to help and there were many months of upheaval and distressing disruption for Edem.

Over these months, Edem began to be more and more withdrawn and seemed to suffer from one virus after another. He had colds, stomach upsets, chicken pox, tonsillitis and lost all appetite and quite large amounts of weight. He became more controlling and rigid over his environment and life generally and lost all interest in activities apart from puzzles, which he would do all day given the opportunity. He had developed sensitivity to sounds and bright lights and would lie down and scream in supermarkets with his hands over his ears. He had no sense of danger and would simply run off into the street or crowded places. He would only eat certain foods in a particular order and would only walk out of the house in a particular direction. Our world was becoming increasingly smaller and more controlled and Edem was very difficult to live with. Whilst the medical professionals who saw him kept blaming the viruses / illnesses for his lack of energy and appetite, it became apparent that Edem had actually lost skills too. By the age of 3 1/2 years he could no longer use a spoon or dress himself and his speech had reduced dramatically and he had started adding odd letters to the single words he did use, and using echolalic language. The little interest he had shown in his younger brother, Divine, when he was born had disappeared, and over the months it had gotten worse as Edem went from ignoring him, to becoming increasingly aggressive towards him and would hurt him if left alone with him.

By this time Edem’s nursery had raised concerns about his concentration levels – pointing to the fact that he could sit for hours concentrating on 40 piece puzzles and completing them. Everyone else, including our family and friends, had repeatedly reassured us that there was nothing to worry about. Edem would sometimes refuse to go to sleep unless one of us sat in his room, sometimes for up to 4 hours each night. We were pleased therefore, to be referred to a pediatrician as we believed Edem was going to be comprehensively assessed. This was in September 2010 when Edem had just turned 4 and we anticipated being given some answers as to what was causing all the problems. The diagnosis, of Autism, given to me at 11.30am on the first day of the 2-day assessment was, therefore, a devastating and unexpected one for us. We were totally unprepared and knew nothing about Autism.

Following his diagnosis, we were informed of the Autism Awareness Care and Training Centre, a member of the Inclusion Ghana network, which provides training for children with autism. Edem was enrolled at the Center two years ago. Within few months in the program, Edem started communicating by telling us what he wanted, using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), a method of communicating through pictures. He can now put on his socks, turn the tap on and off, wash and dry his hands, and drink from a cup. His success may seem like small accomplishments, but for Edem, these are great strides. He has learned so much in such a short period at the Center, and so have we.

World Autism Awareness Day aims to increase people's awareness about autism. The day often features educational events for teachers, health care workers and parents, as well as exhibitions showcasing work created by children with autism. It is estimated that more than 80% of adults with autism are unemployed. Research suggests that employers are missing out on abilities that people on the autism spectrum have in greater abundance than “neurotypical” workers do – such as, heightened abilities in pattern recognition and logical reasoning, as well as a greater attention to detail. These qualities make them ideally suited to certain kinds of employment, such as software testing, data entry, and lab work, to name just a few examples. The hurdles that need to be overcome to unleash this potential include: a shortage of vocational training, inadequate support with job placement, and pervasive discrimination.

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