**Down Syndrome**

**"Opportunities and Choices – A Father’s Brave Decision"**

When Mr. Jehu Atinga, a middle income business man from Accra, heard a baby crying from outside his wife’s hospital room, he knew his life would change forever. Not only had he become a father, but he would soon receive some unexpected news about his newborn son. Shortly after Mr. Atinga had heard cries from the newborn, a nurse walked out of the room with a little bundle – that was Joash. She had his face covered up and the hospital authorities wouldn’t let him see him or his wife. When the pediatrician finally came out, he said to Jehu “there’s a real problem with your son.”

Mr. Atinga followed the pediatrician and nurses into a room where he finally got to meet his baby. When he walked into the room they all turned to him and said “Joash has Down Syndrome” There and then, he had a few moments of shock. After the news had sunk in, Mr. Atinga held Joash for the very first time. With tears in his eyes he said “look at this guy, he’s a blessing from God, I am definitely keeping him.” Soon he walked into his wife’s hospital room with Joash in his arms. Her reaction was unlike one he ever expected. She told him if he kept the baby then they would get a divorce. What happened was when a baby like that was born, the hospital would tell you that you didn’t have to keep it. His wife had already decided. Despite his wife’s warnings of divorce, Mr. Atinga never had a doubt in his mind about wanting to keep Joash. One week after his birth, Joash’s mom filed for divorce.

Now here is a working father who is left with the responsibility of single handedly raising his child who has been diagnosed with Down syndrome. Many would have given up but Mr. Atinga gave Joash, his son, an opportunity, a chance at life. Of course he knew it wasn’t going to be easy especially now that his wife had left him, but he was determined. The first few years were very difficult and most of his life savings went into hospital bills, therapy sessions and so on, making sure that his son received the care and attention he needed and deserved.

Would you believe me if I told you that Joash is now a 21 year old young man who works for a construction company?? Well, he is!! Of course not as an engineer or foreman. Over the years, his father never giving up on him came to the realization that his son had a special gift. He was good with tools, be it carpentry, masonry, plumbing, you name it. It was as though he was brought into this world for that one purpose. It was his niche. Fortunately for them, a church friend of Mr. Atinga who learned about Joash’s unique gift and was intrigued offered to employ him in his construction company. The workers love him there and offer great assistance and supervision.

Mr. Atinga and Joash have been working with parents self help groups for the past 4 years to share their story in the hopes that parents will become better educated on children with Down syndrome thereby allowing them to enjoy full and equal rights, with ‘opportunities’ and ‘choices’.

Recent statistics in Ghana indicates that Down syndrome has an estimated Incidence Rate of 0.125%. Previously children born with Down syndrome as well as other forms of intellectual disabilities were thought to be ‘river babies,’ or demon-possessed witch children. Parents would leave such newborns at orphanages or children’s homes, though occasionally, they were simply taken into the bush and left to die. This is why we at Inclusion Ghana, together with our Member Organizations have made it our mission, to reduce stigmatization and ensure full inclusion of these persons with intellectual disabilities by advocating for the rights and needs through extensive training, research, education and advocacy.

Down Syndrome Day (WDSD) is observed on 21 March of every year. On this day, people with Down syndrome and those who live and work with them throughout the world organise and participate in activities and events to raise public awareness and create a single global voice for advocating for the rights, inclusion and well being of people with Down syndrome. The date for WDSD being the 21st day of the 3rd month, was selected to signify the uniqueness of the triplication (trisomy) of the 21st chromosome which causes Down syndrome.

*The Writer is Auberon Jeleel Odoom, the National Co-ordinator of Inclusion Ghana.*

*Telephone: 0302243291 / 0208151523; Email: info@inclusion-ghana.org; Website: [www.inclusion-ghana.org](http://www.inclusion-ghana.org)*