

Beatrice Lokko: Sweet Mother



6th September 1949 - 19th January 2010

by Christine (CNN) Lokko

Father

Mr. Julius Awadzi (Deceased)

Mother

Mrs. Agnes Awadzi (Deceased)

Spouse

Mr. Christian Lokko

Children

Dr. Cyprien Lokko (deceased)

Dr. Christine Lokko

Mrs. Juliana Lokko-Ankrah

Dr. Leticia Lokko-Hansen

On January 19th, 2010, I was chatting on the phone with my cousin Kezia as I drove home after dropping our son off at daycare. When I opened my front door, I was surprised to see people in my living room. My husband was supposed to be at work. My brother Cyprien and his wife Sheila were also supposed to be at their respective jobs. *“Why are they here on a Tuesday morning?”*

Cyprien, asked me to sit down, and without giving me any explanation for their presence, he offered to say a quick prayer. I was still clutching my phone in bewilderment with Kezia still on the line. I barely paid attention to Cyprien’s prayer. *Why on earth are they here?*

“God’s ways are not our ways,” my brother began, “We have prayed, and prayed, but the Lord knows...” It was then that it suddenly dawned on me... *They are here because of Mummy!* I started shaking my head vigorously. “No, no, no, no, no!” I screamed. I felt hands grab me before I slid onto the floor. “No, no, no, I dreamt of Mummy last night. I just bought a calling card to phone her. Nooooo!”

Mummy cannot be dead!

She may be sick, she may be weak,

Mummy cannot be dead.

Mummy is bigger than life.

My Mummy cannot...

Cannot be dead!

Mummy is gone?

What big shoes to fill!

Oh Mummy, no Mummy.

Always there to guide the path,

Always there to lend a hand,

Oh Mummy, why Mummy?

Who will direct?

Whom shall I follow?

She is always there...

Always there to answer my riddles,

Always calling to check on me,

Always assuring, always being Mummy!

Nooooooooooooo!

Later on, I pieced together the sequence of events. Daddy had called Cyprien to break the news of Mummy's death. Cyprien in turn, had left work, picked up Sheila, and phoned my husband. They then decided to come over and tell me what had happened, in person. I was out running errands, and unbeknownst to me, Kezia had been updated and given the task of keeping me occupied on the phone until I returned home. All the discussions I had had with her as I ran my errands had been meaningless. Talking to her on the phone while I stopped to buy a phone card to call Mummy in Ghana; my detailed narration of a dream from the night before that had given me hope that Mummy would get better... all had been a waste of time. Even while I quoted bible verses confirming that our prayers would get my mother out of her sick bed, Kezia already knew the

reality—Mummy was dead. Kezia had stayed on the phone and humoured me as I shared my hopes for Mummy’s recovery. She had listened, and she had encouraged, but she knew the truth I did not yet know. Mummy was dead. As I look back at the sequence of events, that is one of the most painful, in a series of agonizing memories.

If a tree falls in the forest,

And nobody hears it,

Did the tree really fall?

All those hours that morning

When I hurried through my chores:

Waiting for the store to open,

Waiting to get a calling card,

Worried about things

That should have been the least of my problems.

Would you be lucid?

This time, will you remember me?

Could I give you updates

About exciting news in my life?

About the novel accepted for publication!

All those jittery hours of waiting...

Waiting to talk to you,

And you were already dead!

The last time I saw Mummy alive was in 2008, when she came for a church conference in Georgia and flew to West Virginia to visit. She looked leaner, and darker, almost purplish. She said it was the after effects of the chemotherapy. Her cheeks looked sallow and her smiles more forced. Looking at her, this new version of her, I felt so depressed. Where is the Mummy I knew? Listening to her though, I heard the voice of my Mummy. Gradually, over the few days she stayed with us, I managed to reconcile myself to this new look, while hoping that once the chemo was completely out of her system, I will have my Mummy back. When she left the U.S., I did not know that was the last time I would see her alive. She would be dead almost two years later.

The previous year, Mummy stayed with us for three months. I had given birth to my first son, and she took time off work to come help me take care of him. It did not matter that I was now a mummy too. She ordered me around as if she was the boss of my household, insisting I iron all the baby's clothes after washing them. "He is a gentleman," she would say, "He can't wear shabby clothes." I remember rolling my eyes. *The baby is just going to be lying down all day. Why should I have to iron every piece of clothing?* But Mummy was mummy, so I obeyed. She hovered around me as I fed the baby, or bathed the baby, and when there were challenges we were not sure how to handle, we read the baby books or searched the internet.

Mummy was not a traditional African grandmother. Not the kind that pinched the baby's nose and forced the porridge

down their throat. Not the kind that sucked the phlegm out of the baby's nose when they had a cold. When my husband shared some of these stories from his childhood, Mummy shuddered in horror and said she did not think that was safe for the baby. I can hear her pacing in the bedroom, holding my son, singing to him—original songs she composed just for him.

Sometimes, I saw her deep in thought. Sometimes, she would make certain remarks; like how life was full of lessons, and how some poor decisions can come back to haunt you. I did not like those subjects. They were too deep, too haunting, and I tried to change the topic. If I had known then, that I only had three more years with her, I would have listened to everything she had to tell me... even the uncomfortable topics.

It was towards the end of that trip, that we realized there was a problem with Mummy. She had a couple of days to get back to work. We started running medical tests, but it was time for her to return to Ghana. She continued the tests when she arrived home, and little did I know that it was the beginning of the end.

The Mummy I know was always vibrant. As a child, I remember walking behind her at the Kaneshie Market in Accra, and she walked so fast, I had to run to keep up with her steps. I remember falling off a moving bus, because Mummy had gotten down when the bus stopped in traffic, thinking I was right behind her, but then the driver drove off again to park properly. Not knowing that the bus would stop, and fearing that I will never see Mummy again, I jumped off while the bus was in

motion, and fell onto the street. I can hear Mummy's shrieks as she picks me up, moving us from the path of danger.

Mummy has always been larger than life; even when she was sick from time to time, even, when she struggled with asthma. If you had a problem, she had the solution. She was Mummy, *duh!* Mummy was someone I was always proud of, not just because she was my mummy, but because, as a female role model, she was fair, intelligent, compassionate, and a pacesetter. In school, I could not wait to be asked questions about my family. My mother was a big deal!

Mummy was the co-head of the household, who woke up early and baked pastries to sell at work. At the end of the workday, she joined her husband at the nearby cinema to sell

pastries, while he sold popsicles to moviegoers, to supplement her income as a teacher and his as a banker.

Mummy was the mother who would sew all our uniforms, as well as our school bags. I used to hate that we did not get to carry the standard second-hand backpacks with movie characters that everyone else brought to school. Today, I cannot remember those bags, as they were a dime a dozen. Today, I can remember the bag Mummy sewed when I was in first grade and my brother in third grade. It was made with solid black netting fabric, had a black and white plaid design around the edge, and displayed a black and white fish in the middle of the bag. The bag had a long strap that we could hang across the shoulder as

we raced to school. I can still remember the bag slapping the sides of my thigh.

Mummy did not like to waste anything. It was inevitable that after cooking any rice dish on the stove, there would be a burnt portion that was not edible... so we thought. Mummy soaked the burnt portion in water, and because she knew we would wrinkle our noses in disgust, she would wait till we were not home and recycle the once-burnt-rice into another meal. Upon our arrival we devoured the meal with gusto, after which Mummy would confess. Soon, we all learned to save the burnt rice for a rainy day.

Mummy is the woman who would wake up at dawn the day she was supposed to attend the wedding of a friend or

family member, to sew her attire and hat for the wedding. As someone who hated home science in school, and who today can barely mend tears in my kids' clothing, I am amazed at what my mother could do.

Mummy was not a homemaker, not like me. After graduating from the University of Ghana with her Bachelor's in English in 1973, she was posted to Accra Academy for her National Service, a position that became a permanent one. It was an all boys' school, and at the time, employed very few female teachers. At her death, one of her former students commented that because of her young age when she was first hired, he and his peers took it for granted that they could play tricks on her. Mummy however, quickly put them in their place, earning their respect. Mummy did not start out planning to be a

teacher. Her initial objective was to finish her obligatory year of National Service and leave the school. She was deeply impacted by the students, who were intelligent, and had a passion for learning, motivating her to stay there permanently. It was at Accra Academy that she met my dad, Mr. Christian Barnor Lokko. Many of the students were disappointed when she got married.

Mrs. Beatrice Lokko (nee Awadzi) rose to be head of the English department, and then became one of two assistant principals, then acting headmistress for a year while the school searched for a competent male, and alumnus to take over the position. Mummy became the first (and to date, only) female headmistress of that institution. After serving her term as principal, she accepted a promotion to become the District

Director of Education in the Akuapim South Municipality of the Eastern Region. Before retiring at 60, in 2009, she was the District Director of Education (Gomoa District) in the Central region.

Today, when I visit Accra Academy, I go to the assembly hall and scan through the names on their Wall of Fame—of past principals that headed that institution. In the long list of male names, I see my mother's, the only female, and I beam with pride. Prior to her appointment, it was unheard of that a non-alumnus, much less a woman, would head the school. Since its founding in 1931, Accra Academy had always been headed by male alumni.

After the retirement of her predecessor, Mr. Vincent Freeman, my mother was appointed to an interim position while the hiring committee searched for a permanent replacement. A section of the school wanted an alumnus however the board chairman, Mr. Peter Ala Adjetey, was aware of her competence and requested that the selection process be widened to include non-alumni. Mummy had worked at that school since 1973. She had the qualifications, loved her job, and was confident that there was no other candidate who could do the job better than she could. She was not concerned that she was not a man, nor an alumnus. I have heard from more than one source that she floored the interviewing panel. One of the panellists, a headmaster of another institution, remarked after the interview that she performed admirably. He joked that after each question

was posed, she would pause for a moment in thought, and then suddenly, like an erupted boil, her responses would gush out, unimpeded. It was a no brainer that she was going to get the appointment. She was going to defy history; she was going to set a precedent. In 1997, she became the first female principal of the Accra Academy.

Mr. Botchway, her former student who later joined her staff as an Agricultural Science teacher, then the head of the department, and eventually became a principal of Ningo Secondary School, called Mummy Nehemiah—the biblical prophet who led the building of the Jerusalem wall. For many years Accra Academy could not boast of a secure wall. This posed a risk for students and staff who lived on campus. Mr. Botchway calls Mummy “Nehemiah” because under her

leadership, the school became completely walled for the first time in its history. He also describes her as a tigress. She had a strong will and refused to back down when she believed in her mission. The construction of the wall was an expensive project for a state school on a limited budget. Mummy reduced labour costs by collaborating with the Mamobi prison, whose inmates provided the labour for construction. Rather than pay expensive fees to outside contractors to provide cement blocks, she developed a program where instead of sending financially challenged students home for non-payment of fees, they were hired to mould blocks. The remuneration for their labour went toward paying their tuition.

During the construction of the wall mummy faced other challenges. Part of the property had been encroached upon by a

car salesman with strong political ties, who refused to relocate his business. Being the tigress that she was, she organized demonstrations with the students and brought the media to cover the event. This drew the attention of the sitting Regional Minister for Greater Accra, Daniel Ohene Agyekum, who intervened and settled the matter. I was in college at the time, unaware of the exciting events in Mummy's life. She called me one evening to give updates. I remember the excitement in her voice as she narrated the story about the demonstrations. "We chanted *tsooboi* as we marched to the site." *Tsooboi*, is a chant of protest. The thunder of *tsooboi* by hundreds of protesters signals a battle. With her students, staff and media behind her, the Accra Academy family saved their property. That was my mother! Even though I was not a part of this event, I could

imagine my mother leading her troops. She was a leader from the people and a leader of the people.

Prior to her appointment as principal, the school had a piggery, managed by the Agriculture department and utilized as a resource for instruction. Significant funding was needed for the procurement of teaching and learning materials. Mummy wanted the department to be self-sufficient financially and provided the resources to do so, including two offices and a large store room. Under Mummy's leadership and with her total support, Mr. Botchway expanded the unit from a piggery, to include poultry and crop production, which they marketed to outsiders. She even donated produce from our family farm, to help feed the pigs. The school farm was a success. The

department won two regional and one district “Best Farmer Award”.

Mummy liked sports and whole heartedly supported her athletes. I went with her to a sporting event at the Kaneshie Sports Complex. We arrived a little late, with all the athletes and supporters already seated at the stands. As soon as my mother entered the arena, a loud chant went up over and over again, “Sweet Mother, Sweet Mother”. I was so taken aback! *The students actually liked her!* Mummy was walking in front of me, hands raised high as she turned around and waved to everyone, just like a politician at a rally. She beamed with smiles, and she beamed with all the love she had for her students. Later at her funeral, when I heard tales from her previous students, the term “sweet mother” made so much

sense. She was not just a principal. She was their mother. She fed the hungry, she comforted the broken-hearted, she visited the sick, she rebuked the truants, and she rooted for all her students to succeed.

During her tenure as headmistress, the school won the Milo Soccer Championship, earning them the coveted Gold Cup. Armed robbers broke into Mummy's office that week to steal the trophy, which luckily was not kept in her office. School property was stolen and the office vandalized. This stroke of bad luck was not short-lived. A few days later, her office burnt down. The challenges did not break her spirit. She used this opportunity to raise funds and transform that section, which used to house her office and classrooms, into an Administration block. The principal's office was enlarged to

include an office, a restroom, waiting area, and conference section. The classrooms were converted into offices for two assistant principals, a functioning staff room, and faculty restrooms.

Mummy established the ICT laboratory at the school with the support of an alumnus, Mr. Annan in Norway, who donated 40 computers. She was the first principal to successfully manage the construction of an on-campus residence for the school's principal, though she would not get to live there before her term ended. She spearheaded the creation of the Accra Academy Credit Union which continues to be a successful venture. At the time, the staff had a welfare fund to which they contributed, to help with social needs like out-doorings, weddings, illnesses etc. She suggested the creation of a credit

union that will help with financial needs, allowing staff members to borrow funds for larger projects. She gave guidance and nurtured the group from its experimental stage, till it gained full union status.

A principal at Accra Academy was a huge deal. It was a prestigious secondary school with a boarding house, and admission to the institution was very competitive. When the examination results for the basic schools were out, Mummy's workload increased tenfold. Parents would be at the school long before she arrived at work, trying to ensure a spot for their sons. During this time, she would often come home late, only to find more parents waiting for her at home. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew where the headmistress of Accra Academy lived. It was easy to find our home. We lacked

anonymity. Sometimes, Mummy would move out of the house temporarily, and take refuge in my uncle's house at another suburb of Accra. That was the only way she could get some work done.

In our part of the world, giving gifts to curry favour is part of the culture. With that mentality, parents who came to our house to seek admission for their children came bearing gifts... to bribe her. Even as youngsters, we knew those parents would never gain admission at Accra Academy. Bribery had the opposite effect on Mrs. Beatrice Lokko. One such morning, I had just woken up when I heard the doorbell. I opened the gate for a woman who wanted to see Mummy. I led her to the balcony seats and went to get Mummy from the room. I

returned to my room, which was adjacent to the balcony, to eavesdrop. The visitor started pleading for my mother to admit her son, and as my mother indicated that there was no guarantee her son could gain admission, the woman took out an envelope from her purse. My mother did not give her the chance to present the money. She yelled at the woman to get out of the house. The woman apologized and pleaded, but Mummy would not hear it. She accused the woman of being a devil, tempting people to sin.

I had always taken it for granted that it was easy for Mummy to turn down bribes. After all, haven't I seen her turn down gifts many, many times? As her children, we were forbidden from accepting gifts from anyone. Once, my younger sister Juliana got bitten by a dog because she had been ordered

by Mummy to return a cash gift that my mother's friend had given her as compensation for running an errand. My mother's friend ended up spending more money when she had to take my sister to the hospital to get shots. We all felt sorry for Juliana however, after that incident, we never forgot Mummy's rules—we were not to accept gifts.

To that end, I was quite surprised when I was at a church event many years later, and heard my mother share a testimony about overcoming struggles. She talked about the year she decided to start a daycare at our home and how she lacked the resources. As she sat in her office pondering how to raise funds, a man walked into her office, requesting a favour. He literally came with a box of cash to get Mummy to grant his request. Mummy talked about her faith wavering. Was this a sign from

God? Was her prayer being answered? After several minutes of debating with herself, Mummy sent the man away with his money.

It took Mummy longer than she would have wished to achieve her dream of opening the daycare. With my dad's support and my meagre earnings from National Service, we eventually started the daycare in our house. Mummy was proud that she did not accept that man's gift. After her testimony at church, I learned an important lesson that evening—my mother was human! She wasn't perfect, she had struggles, and she worked hard to stick to her morals. What a revelation! I had always pictured my mother as flawless. I can remember my childhood prayers, "God, I am not perfect, so I understand you

may not want to answer my prayers, however, please look at my mother who obeys your every will, and grant me my request!"

Mummy was passionate about her faith. She was one of the elders at church—the Aggrey Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, often sitting at a pew unofficially reserved for other female leaders. She was a mentor for the young women, a support for the older women, and a caregiver for the sick and shut-in. On a few occasions, Mummy even preached the sermon. At her funeral, the pastor played one of her messages. Even as she lay in state, we heard her voice reverberate through the speakers all around us.

Mummy was compassion personified. While at Accra Academy, one of the teachers suffered a stroke and was

admitted at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital. Mummy would visit her often and the times that she couldn't be there, she insisted that her sister-in-law, Mrs. Patricia Awadzi, a physiotherapist in the same hospital, check frequently on the patient. While Mrs. Awadzi was not an acquaintance of the sick teacher, Mummy was so worried about her colleague that she wanted the ailing teacher to have frequent visits. Her sister-in-law acquiesced. Many years later, Mummy herself became a patient at this hospital. During her hospitalization in the surgical ward, she shared the room with a breast cancer patient from out of town, who had undergone a few surgeries and was terrified of going through another one. In her hospital bed, Mummy encouraged her roommate, led her to receive Christ, and "adopted" her as part of her family. Since the

woman's family lived in Winneba which is 65.7 kilometres from Accra, Mummy ensured that when her family brought her three meals a day, they also brought food for her roommate. When the roommate was discharged and had to undergo chemotherapy, Mummy invited her to live in our home for the duration. After her death, the roommate visited our home. She was equally broken by the news. She shared that without Mummy's friendship and encouragement during her hospital stay, she would not have survived. That was Mummy!

As a child, if you asked me to describe my mother, I would have said, "too-giving". She was extremely generous. My dad will buy fresh groceries and before we would blink, Mummy would have distributed most of them. Nobody visited our home and left empty-handed. She was always thinking of

what else she could give away. I used to get so upset when someone brought us something and Mummy soon gave it away. Of course, just as she gave, others also gave to her, but to my child-like mind, I wished we could keep everything and not share. Today, if you ask me to describe my mother in a word, I would say “generous”.

In addition to her selflessness, other characteristics capture Mummy’s essence. She was honest and fair. For years, we had bought *kenkey*, a popular Ghanaian meal made with corn, from a particular vendor in the neighbourhood because their *kenkey* was simply delicious. After a while though, their product lost its superior quality. As there were other competitors, we could have simply stopped buying their *kenkey*. Mummy however, did not want the little old lady who owned

the business to lose customers. As a matter of course, she herself never went to buy the *kenkey*. My siblings and I ran those errands. That day however, Mummy accompanied us to the *kenkey* house and requested to speak to the business owner. Mummy politely told the woman that her *kenkey* no longer tasted good, and that if the quality did not improve, she would lose customers. The elderly woman apologized and confessed that she had not been active in supervising the production process as her health was failing. She vowed to do something about it. A few days later, the woman had one of her staff deliver several balls of *kenkey* to Mummy for free. She wanted to know if the quality of her *kenkey* had improved.

Mummy's motto was that everyone had to be the best version of himself or herself, regardless of gender, age, or tribe.

She encouraged anyone she met to strive for self-improvement. My husband credits my mother for his achievements in academia. When we first started going out in high school, my husband had failed some of his subjects for the Advanced Level exam and could not get into the university. My mother arranged for a teacher in Accra Academy to tutor him in the failed subjects. Passing those subjects allowed him to get into college for his bachelors', eventually earning a doctorate in Education. When she opened her daycare, several students in the neighbourhood attended free of charge. Whenever she saw an unemployed mother carrying a child who was not attending school, she would find tasks for the mother to perform at the daycare in exchange for the child's tuition. Mummy strongly believed that the unemployed youth in the neighbourhood

would become armed robbers in the future; that is, unless people took action to divert them away from that trajectory.

After Mummy's death, I heard from family, her previous students and fellow teachers. I greedily drank in all the information I heard about her. Some of the stories I had heard before; others were new to me. I visited her former workplace in Nsawam, one of her last places of work. I wanted to hear from non-teaching staff. I wanted to hear from people who knew her outside of Accra Academy, where she worked for more than thirty years.

I am used to subordinates calling their supervisor by their name or their title. She was district director after all. I expected to hear them call her "director". At the Nsawam office, the staff

called her “Mummy.” She had worked there for a couple of years and moved to another district, but they all remembered her fondly. They shared stories of how she always came to work with breakfast goodies for everyone, how she treated them as family and friends, rather than employees. She was their leader, and their teacher. As a student of Public Administration, I had studied different types of administrators, and it was humbling to study this leader whose administrative style was unique in a culture where leaders expected to be hallowed.

In 2008, Mummy received the Ghana Women’s Achievers Award for excellence in education. She also received an award for outstanding bravery in promoting educational

excellence, and for being the first woman to head a boys' institution in Ghana and Africa.

The last time I ever saw Mummy, was the day she lay in state at her funeral. Though she lay there unmoving, she looked so beautiful. Her skin was her normal colour, her cheeks had lost their sallowness. Granted, that an experienced caretaker had done a fine job, I was happy that my last sight of Mummy would be that version of Mummy. Oh Mummy; my genesis, the very core of my foundation... "Sweet, Sweet Mother!"



Sweet Mother,

What an enigma,

What a phenomenon,

What an honour,

To have been borne by you,

Nurtured by you,

Taught by you,

Loved by you!

Fair, honest, compassionate, creative

Bold, determined, unwavering.

Intelligent.

African woman!

Sweet Mother.

