

# Embracing deafness and the silent world

**BY BRIAN KOKORUWE**

Brian Kokoruwe shares his journey from growing up during civil war in Nigeria to becoming Director of Deaf UK Athletics and a published author.

**W**hile I am active in the Deaf BSL community, involved in Deaf sports and the Government BSL Advisory Board, my identity is very much shaped by my culture and experiences growing up. Although I was born in London, as a three-month-old baby my parents put me on a plane to Lagos, Nigeria, under the watchful eyes of the cabin crew. I spent the early part of my life in Nigeria, West Africa, and was brought up by my grandparents in the village while my parents were managing with life in London as students.

Village life was very simple. They spoke various languages, which I learnt as I grew up and became accustomed to multiple languages. There was no electricity, television, gas, or any other luxuries but I was happy running around in bare feet and shorts. While I was still very young and living with my grandparents, the Nigerian Civil War broke out. Unable to continue to stay in our home, we had to escape and lived a tough life in the forest while the war was being fought in the villages and cities.

My parents eventually completed their studies in the UK and returned to Nigeria. Initially, I rejected them as I believed that my grandparents were my parents. Slowly, they encouraged me to spend more time with them and then enrolled me at a local city school where various languages were spoken. I tried to learn a bit of English there, but it was very challenging.

As I was getting accustomed to my parents and city life, I became deaf following a meningitis infection when I was 13 years old at boarding school. Prior to my deafness, I had not met any deaf person nor seen one on the television. My father thought it was best to bring me back to England; the country where I was born for treatment in



*Brian at boarding school in Nigeria before his hearing loss, posing with the athletics trophies.*



*Brian at mainstream school in London.*

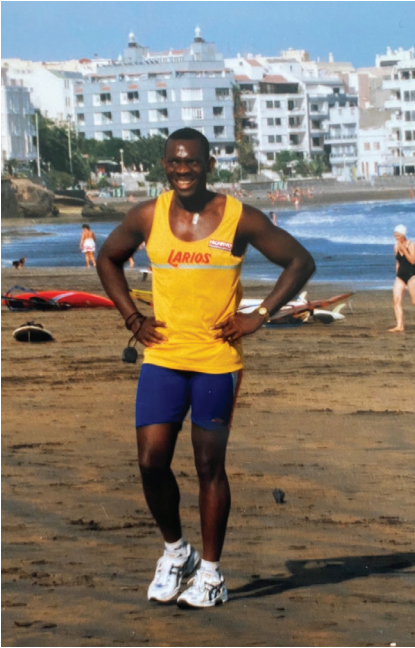
the hope of finding a cure for the hearing loss. I would then be allowed to return to my school in Nigeria.

Unfortunately, despite all the amazing efforts that my father made and the various treatments I went through, the hearing loss could not be reversed, and I was encouraged to attend a mainstream school in England, which had a partially hearing unit (PHU).

Although the teachers at the PHU had some experience on the education of deaf children, we were still forced to wear

hearing aids and headphones to 'hear' the teachers. I hated these hearing aids and headphones as they did not help me to hear at all, but made me more frustrated and angry at not being able to hear the teachers. I preferred having none of the technology, and wanted to remain in the silent world and lip read. Some lectures took place at the mainstream classroom where the teachers had zero knowledge of what deafness meant. The teachers spoke while writing on the board, walking across the classroom, or while not facing me, and expected me to fully understand what they were saying. It was very depressing for me, especially when some teachers kept asking me, 'can you hear me?'. I wanted to run out of the classroom to cry.

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GB Athletics Team Manager, Brian, with some of the Great Britain Athletics supporters in Bulgaria.

“I preferred having none of the technology, and wanted to remain in the silent world and lip read”



Brian with British politician, former World Record Holder, Olympic-medal winning track and field athlete and current President of IAAF, Lord Sebastian Coe.



Carrying the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Queen's Relay Baton.

Following the meningitis infection, I was also left unable to walk for some time but, with the aid of daily physiotherapist sessions and extra self-training, I not only regained the ability to walk again but was selected to be the captain of my school's athletics and cross-country teams. Despite the challenges faced at school and leaving with basic qualifications, I then went onto college before going to university, where I was also the athletics and cross-country captain.

It was very difficult in those days to get a place at the university as they asked, 'how will you be able to do group exercises?'. I have since graduated with four degrees and have undertaken various roles, including within charities, fashion, legal, government and financial corporations.

My interest has since moved more towards working with deaf people. I spent some time setting up new systems at my local deaf club and worked as a project manager for a research project looking at GPs and Hospital Health Access Provisions for Deaf People in North-West England. This project won a major award for the Most Useful Consumers' project in North-West England and I was invited to the House of Parliament to pick up the award. At the end of the project, I set up the UK Disabled People's Movement Archive project for a major organisation of disabled people, then worked as a team leader at a large college with responsibilities for learners with additional needs.

I have competed in deaf and non-deaf athletics competitions. Following the

disappointment of GB track and field athletics in the 2001 Deaflympics Games in Rome, I decided to set up Deaf UK Athletics and, as Director of Deaf UK Athletics and Great Britain Deaf Athletics Team, I established a pool of high-calibre GB deaf athletes who won medals at the European, World and Deaflympic Championships, as well as holding world records. Currently, I am working as a company development manager and run my own businesses.

The year 2019 saw the publication of the first book in my autobiographical series. *When Mother Cried* received plaudits from around the globe. This was swiftly followed by the second book in the series, *My Father Tried*. My third book called *Deaf Not Dumb or Stupid*, has now been published and follows on with the difficulties I had to face in mainstream education.

To find out more, visit:  
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