

Dear Friends,

My name is Iliyasu Kasimu. I come from Jos North Central Nigeria.

When I first learned I was awarded this scholarship, I was ... happy as would every other person. But a feeling of nervousness set in too. I was nervous not because I did not know what the scholarship was about but because there I was with a chance of a lifetime. A chance to do what I had yearned to do. A chance to realize what had been a dream of sorts for me; it dawned on me that all that I had been doing was journeying towards something and you never knew what it is and where it is going take you to until something happens and then you go 'ah ha!' That was the moment for me. So why am I here?

I am an aspiring filmmaker; I want to make films; I believe some things should not just be happening; like the ethno-religious violence in my city Jos, Nigeria. I just wonder why it happens; particularly why young people would be encouraged to kill and destroy in the name of God or in order to annihilate another person because they see the world differently. It is not just acceptable by any human standards. Has it always been like this? No! So let me tell you about my hometown.

Jos city in the past was a haven for creativity; ideas and energy and success flowed freely on its streets. Most of the big names in Nigerian entertainment and sports industry today grew up in Jos or went to school in Jos. This is not just because the city is home to two of the most influential film and television institutions but because of the mix of its people. Jos is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Nigeria; it used to be called the miniature Nigeria. Christians and Muslims and even animists shared neighbourhoods.

Mosques, Churches and shrines shared walls. Igbos, Hausas, Yorubas, Urhobos and all other ethnic groups lived in harmony and unity with the Anaguta, Afizere and Berom natives. The result was a wealth of ideas coming together to create and give the city its uniqueness. Since American style vehicle plates were introduced in the country vehicle plates in Jos have carried the inscription "Home of Peace and Tourism". That moniker stuck and still does but now with an ironical tinge. Jos was indeed a hub for tourists and a home of peace. It has a weather and landscape paralleled by no other place in the country. Assorted vegetables and fruits are taken to other parts of the country from Jos. Its ultra-modern market was the hub of commercial activities in the whole of central Nigeria until it was destroyed by an inferno in February of 2002; a result of the ethno-religious crises the city has been witnessing since 2001. Jos is still such a beautiful place but the tourists' visits have declined. Now the city has been a ghost of its former self. Its neighborhoods have been demarcated between religious and ethnic lines. You hear of 'them' and 'us' now instead of the 'we' you hear before. Young people kill and maim each other with impunity and at the slightest provocations. It could be a football match, a commercial motorcyclist arguing with his passenger, students' argument or just somebody stepping on another's toe in the market place. The level of acrimony is really alarming and disheartening.

I have thought about it for quite some time and have realized that ignorance and frustration with the state of things in the country is at the heart of it. Given that political office is about the only means of getting to money and other "privileges", the different ethnic groups particularly those called "indigenes" and

those termed as "settlers" jostle for political offices and this in the end breeds distrust and fear and hatred that culminates into the violence we see. There is also competition for land and its resources. In this case the Fulani cattle breeders compete with the natives for grazing land, which to the natives is farmland. Corruption is another factor; In Nigeria being appointed a top government job means unrestrained access to the public till. Although the federal government is all out to stamp that out now, the toll can be seen in poor infrastructure, poor and unaffordable health care system, poor quality education; unemployment amongst youths and so on. All these come together to put a lot pressure on the citizens' psyche so much so the option that remains only is succumbing to violence.

Until we could get to the root of these challenges whatever efforts we put to stop the violence from happening will not work and the city's future and indeed that of the country is bleak. For nobody could tell when the violence would end. Analyst foretell of more gloomy days ahead. The level of ignorance and unemployment amongst a lot of young people in the city and even the whole of Nigeria is very alarming. I do not mean young people do not know how to read and write or do not know that the world is round and all that. I mean a lot of us choose not to know that it is okay for someone to have a different way of seeing life. That prosperity comes to a place only when peoples of different backgrounds and cultures intermingle and cohabit. Maybe it is not our fault but then can we not see that youths in other parts of the world today are the forces that drive developmental changes and creativity. That when youths meet they meet to move frontiers. Not to shrink them? They meet to create not

to destroy; they meet with their minds not with clubs, machetes and daggers and even AK 47s. Look around and you'll see what I mean; the owner of Timberland is a young man; lady Gaga is a young woman, facebook was started by a young man and run by young men from different cultures; just look around. The world of success is peopled by the young and energetic. I think lack of knowledge and information breeds misunderstanding then intolerance then violence because it exposes one too many young people to just their own points of view to issues. It makes them refuse to see that the multiplicity of angles is just natural and so should be acknowledged and harnessed for common good. We need to accept each other for whom and what we are if ever we want the problems of unemployment and corruption and poor infrastructure to go.

Someone then has to say these to these young people. Maybe the government who is supposed to make sure an atmosphere ideal for creativity exists; maybe the religious and opinion leaders that indoctrinate them with tales that only breed more hatred and intolerance; maybe him; maybe her. But I cannot wait. I feel the work of making them realize that they are the future has to begin. Films and other forms of entertainment are about the best tools to use for that; fortunately for me Nigerian youth are steeped in those. I want put a lot of progressive messages in film and other media targeted at youths in order to douse the distrust and hatred. I think if the young people are reached, a whole chunk of the problem would have been solved. I want to engage the youths in projects that will introduce them to filmmaking and other media. The idea is to introduce them to alternative means of airing their grievances than violence as well as to stimulate dialogue.

Coming to work under this scholarship I believe exposes me to more methods and strategies employed to foster understanding and unity amongst youths of different ethnicity and religions in Jos and indeed Nigeria at large. This has to be done for the benefit of the society. Last week, I was part of a project called "Express Yourself" at the Voksenasen Centre in Oslo where young people came together to express themselves using different means. We gathered for a music, art and dance event outside the Nobel Peace centre; the scene where more than 100,000 people the week before had gathered to show solidarity with the victims of the Utoya attack. That is a very good inspiration for me. I believe if I introduce something like that in Jos it will create a lot of impact in terms reducing the distrust and xenophobia amongst the youths and will also. The vibration from Oslo and indeed what I experience in Uppsala Stockholm will bring me in contact also to people and ideas that drive development and prosperity especially amongst young people in this region of the world. Here I represent millions of young people in my city and indeed my country that yearn for the situation of things to change; who yearn to join their peers in other parts of the world in enriching the human experience with innovations and creativity. I thank so much the Ragnar Sohlman Foundation for this opportunity and I hope our relationship can continue for a very long time.