

## **KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. PANTON OKON**

Mr. Clement Ikpatt, Senior Special Assistant (Diaspora Affairs) to the Executive Governor of Akwa Ibom State; Chief (Prince) Paul Bassey-Duke, The President of Efik National Association (ENA-USA); members of the Executive Council of the ENA-USA; Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I consider it an honor and great privilege to be delivering the keynote address today. Today, I will be speaking as an individual who has been associated with the Efik people, someone who is very passionate about youth education and development and one who is simple enough to believe that every individual has a divine purpose for living. I am hoping that the 2013 convention of the ENA will challenge us to get more involved in the education of our youth.

We have the task of *‘Ensuring All Efik Youth are Educated’* and that involves embracing the reality that the growth, development and progress of the Efik people is largely dependent on the education of the Efik youth. If the Efik people are going to reach their God-ordained destiny, then the education of the Efik youth cannot be overemphasized, downplayed or neglected. We would be failing in our duties if the foundation is not laid to enable our youth to assume their future responsibilities. Educating our youth is the most sensible way of making a high-quality investment in human capital that will yield enduring dividends in the future.

What then does it mean to ensure that all Efik youth are educated? It means taking all necessary steps to understand what true education really is and making sure our youth have the opportunity to obtain the same. Some obvious factors that should be considered in this regard are students’ willingness, ability and preparedness to learn; choice and quality of courses and schools; admission policies of institutions and of course, financial requirements. The not-so-obvious factors will be alluded to in the following part of this address. Generally, a college education is considered to be the prerequisite for readiness to confront the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the acquisition of a college degree is not necessarily evidence of the attainment of maturity or readiness to face the challenges of life. There is more to education than academic success. Modern technological advances in communication and aviation have revolutionized the educational landscape. Today virtual colleges are the norm with student enrolment cutting across the whole world, and job competition has become global. Therefore the college graduate will require unique qualities in order to successfully face the sophisticated challenges of tomorrow. “Neighborhood Voice” columnist, Timothy Goler states *“Education must become a total transformative experience, not a rigid process geared to increasing test results”*.

It is with the above in mind that I would advocate holistic education that according to Ron Miller, one of the leading pioneers in the field of holistic education *“...is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace”*. Positive learning environments should be created not only in schools but also in homes and communities so that our youth would develop *“... an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning.”* The holistic education of our youth will require the involvement of ENA adult members who must be prepared to embrace change, lifelong learning and cooperation with one another. It should be stated here that in recognition of the importance

of lifelong learning, many American universities have established Lifelong Learning Centers for veterans, retirees and anyone who is interested in continuous learning, age notwithstanding. Harold Wilson, former Prime Minister of UK once said ***“He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery”*** To help our youth, we must keep abreast of educational developments and be proactive with regards to the implementation of positive findings.

The 2011-2012 ‘Global Competitiveness Report’, ranked Singapore 2<sup>nd</sup> in ‘Quality of Educational System’ mainly due to her emphasis on broad-based and holistic education. This emphasis has transformed Singapore from a developing country to a modern industrial economy within one generation. True education is broad-based and holistic and comprises both formal and informal aspects. The Greek philosopher and mathematician, Aristotle said ***“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”*** True education causes the individual to embrace positivity, hope, humility and passion for the welfare of mankind. The prospects of emancipation of mankind from poverty, darkness, mediocrity and from dysfunctional living should really be the driving force behind the acquisition of a true education. True education informs character and integrity. Martin Luther King, Jr, said, ***“Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education.”*** and C.S. Lewis said ***“Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil.”*** True education should produce mental, physical, economic and spiritual development. True education trains the individual to be selfless and service-oriented. True education encourages the individual to appreciate his/her uniqueness without trampling on others or seeking to subdue or swindle others to achieve their goals. There were many educated Germans in Nazi (Nat-si) Germany, yet the Holocaust took place because according to Wiesel (Vi-zel), their education ***“... emphasized theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstraction rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience.”*** True education promotes unity in diversity and strives to eradicate discrimination. It is rather sad that all over the world we see supposedly educated individuals engaging in not only anti-social behavior but fraudulent and corrupt acts that lead to, in some cases, the bankruptcy of companies, destabilization of national economies and the oppression of their fellow citizens. In such cases, the misuse of position, power and privilege is a portrayal of a deficient education. True education aims for high moral ground and prepares the educated for the battles of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

Today our Efik youth are potential yet to be fully tapped; innovation lying beneath the surface and begging to be stirred up; creativity waiting to explore the limitless boundaries of space; hope for nations riddled by waste, fraud and catastrophic corruption; energy yearning for catalytic sparks; vibrancy seeking an outlet; great possibilities at the threshold of explosion and mind-boggling artistry calling for articulate expression. ***Do you catch the vision?*** I visualize our Efik youth excelling beyond our wildest dreams and creating world-class models of human endeavor that would build organizations, communities and nations which recognize and promote the worth and uniqueness of individuals. Our youth have the potential to make an indelible mark on the earth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In years of teaching Math in Nigeria, United Kingdom and the US, I have encountered students who have great potential, are intelligent but who demonstrate difficulty appreciating the necessity for academic rigor and hard work. We must raise our youth to appreciate the fact that success comes only after hard work and that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We have to inculcate in our youth a mindset of sacrifice and service and teach them that a selfish and self-centered life is a worthless life. In addition, we should love them unconditionally; motivate them with words of encouragement and inspiration as they endeavor to cope with the distractions, temptations and challenges of life.

Efik youth are our fruits and producing good fruit requires effort, perseverance, determination, sacrifice and wisdom. Our priority should be the training of Efik youth to become responsible servant leaders, mature and morally sound individuals capable of good judgment and critical thinking and who would think of others more highly than themselves. And for those of us, the older generation, who have not yet embraced a selfless and sacrificial mindset, it is not too late. We can change and thereby become more productive and inspirational. Our objective should be to encourage, support and guide our youth to be the people that God created them to be.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that there can be no accomplishment without sacrifice. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher, Ernest Renan [pronounced, Ono] said ***“No idea can succeed except at the expense of sacrifice; no one ever escapes without enduring strain from the struggle of life.”*** It will cost us something to achieve this laudable goal of the ENA. Everyone must be involved. It is time for us to work out our inner convictions. In James 2:17, the Bible states ***“... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”*** This is the time for action, not just for hoping. Let us do whatever it takes to raise and establish our Efik youth for they are our legacy.

In setting out his priorities for office in 1997, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said ***“Ask me my three main priorities for government and I tell you education, education, education”***. Today I repeat ***“education, education, education ...”*** for all Efik youth irrespective of background or status and I want to challenge us to help make that a reality by contributing time, effort, financial resources, and anything else that will pave the way for our glorious goal. In practical terms, this means contributing towards scholarships for deserving youth, involvement in mentoring our youth, helping to provide the intangible ingredients of a true education (something that many schools and colleges do not provide), support for youth engagements or programs, self-improvement and lots of prayers. Jim Rohn said ***“If you really want to do something, you’ll find a way. If you don’t, you’ll find an excuse”*** I am confident that with God’s help, we will find a way forward. “Born without eyes or a nose, 16 year old Cassidy Hooper “has never given up on her goals and aspirations” She said, ***“I don’t need easy; I need possible”*** There may be challenges ahead but the ENA goal is a great possibility. Let us join hands together to give our youth a true education. Thank you for listening and God bless and prosper you all.