



Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin

Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin (born 19 May 1985) is a computer programmer and the founder of Pearls Africa Foundation, a [non-profit organization](#) focused on educating young girls and women in underserved communities through providing access to technology proficiency and mentoring for the overarching purpose of economic independence. She was honoured by CNN in 2018 as an African hero. She shares some of her experiences with Ademola Olonilua

Most people believe that computer programmers are nerds. Would you describe yourself as one?

I think I would describe myself as someone who believes in personal development and that if you stop learning, you would start dying. I believe that you just have to keep learning. Being called a nerd may or may not work in this aspect; it all depends but we all have to keep learning because there is no time to be idle. I believe your time is your life and what you do with your time counts a lot.

You were recently featured as a CNN African Hero. How do you feel about the development?

I learnt that I am the first Nigerian to be featured in the programme's 12 years of history. When I was invited, I did my research to find out who the other people had been from Nigeria but I did not see anyone. When I asked them, I was told that I am actually the first Nigerian and the only African this year. When I was honoured by *CNN*, I felt it was a big one for us and it has given us an international recognition and more responsibility. There is more work to be done. People who did not believe in us or did not know of our existence are now reaching out to us. I think it is a big deal but a bigger deal for Nigeria because it puts Nigeria on the world map for good. It just shows that we may have underprivileged areas around us but what can we get from these places? Louts or people who are ready to learn? I think it puts Nigeria on the map for something positive. For us, as an organisation, it gives us more responsibility and work. It is not a time to relax but buckle down to handling more responsibilities.

If you are to explain to an average Nigerian, how would you define computer coding?

An average Nigerian uses a smartphone that I am sure of. Even in the slums, there are people who use smartphones. So if people in the slums or IDP camps use smartphones, you can bet that an average Nigerian uses a smartphone. The different things you use to communicate on your phone are coded, they are programmed. It just shows that a set of people gave instructions to the computers on what to do. When I press my phone, what functions do I want it to carry out? That is what coding is all about. You are indirectly just giving instructions to your computer to perform tasks. That is the simplest I can give as an explanation to the layman. If I were to be at a tech conference, I would not give this type of explanation. But basically, it means giving instructions to the computer. In essence, computers are not as smart as we think; it is the smartness of an individual that makes the computer smart. So your smartphone is not smart if there are no programs or applications on it.

At what point did you fall in love with computers?

It started when I was in Akure at my father's house. At that time, my brother suggested that I visit cybercafés regularly so I wouldn't just stay at home idle during a particular holiday. I was about 10 years old at the time when I touched a computer for the first time in my life. After I completed my schooling in Jos, I came to Lagos and enrolled at NIIT because I did not want to stay at home while seeking admission into the university and that was when I practicalised a lot of things I had been doing before which was Microsoft point, Powerpoint, Microsoft excel among the rest. I did the intermediate level at NIIT but I did not enroll for the advanced level.

My passion for computer coding was actually discovered when I joined an IT auditing firm while looking for admission into school. I joined as an intern which simply means that you are a 'learner'. Over time, I was able to grow. I studied Business Administration at the University of Lagos, but it was a part-time programme because I was combining school with work. I grew to be an associate consultant in an IT firm and I was a data analyst at the same time. It was a rigorous time for me because I was training, working and schooling. When I was in the IT firm, I was one of the youngest and the person with the least educational qualification because a lot of people had their Master's degrees, many of them had worked for years but came back to get training. I remember gaining admission to some schools while I was there but I was offered a full-time programme but I turned it down because I felt that while my mate would graduate and be looking for jobs, I was already in a position whereby I would get a job immediately after schooling. I went to school for five years while I was in that organisation for about seven years. One of the criteria of being in that firm was to be a programmer so you could learn on the job. It was also an IT audit firm, so I learnt a lot in that regard. Eventually, I began to teach classes and I was teaching people who were older than my father at a point. It was very funny to me because they did not know that I was just at 100 level in the university and I was teaching them. It made me realise that it was not about speaking English alone but having the knowledge and passing it across to others through the English language.

We learnt you lost your mother while you were just four years old. What led to her death?

I learnt she was sick. We are about ten children in my family from three mothers and one father. I have four older ones and all they told me was that she fell ill and died. I attended her burial.

How was life without a mother?

I would say that for me, it was normal because when you are born into something, it becomes a norm till you step out of your situation to see the way everybody is; then you realise that your upbringing was not normal. I would say that it was normal for a very long time until I was about 16 years old. It was at that point that I started living with foster parents and guardians and I noticed how they were relating to their children. It was at that moment that I realised what I was missing. At the same time, I really did not know what I was missing until I could see what I was comparing life with. For me, life was a struggle.

What exactly were the struggles you had to surmount?

When I was able to differentiate my left from right, I knew I had to fend for myself early in life. I grew up with an independent mentality which I still have. I may not have to describe it totally but I know that I do not wish for anyone to grow up without a mother. If I need to know about my mother, I would have to ask my older ones because I did not know her.

Having a mother means having a role model and if you do not have that, then I wish you the best. When I was trying to gain admission into the university, I did not have anyone to say, 'come let us go.' Unfortunately, the way our country is, you have a limited slot for so many people so what is the hope of someone who does not have anyone to say, 'come let us get you into school?' That particular struggle was done by myself and I remember traveling from state to state seeking admission. I made all my required papers at once but I spent about four years seeking admission. If you have a mother who is alive, I am happy for you but if you do not, then the Lord is your strength.

Whenever you are not staring at your laptop, what do you do to relax?

Most of the time, I do not know what relaxation means. The things I used to indulge in before was to play table tennis and go swimming but I don't do them anymore because I do not have the time. Travelling can be very fun and of course, sitting at the airport, which I did not start doing until 2013.

Why do you find sitting at the airport relaxing?

It actually depends on the kind of airport as well but I like it because the ambience is different from what I have in my house. I like the airports outside Africa very relaxing because you are by yourself most of the time and you might still be on your laptop. You could decide to walk around or just listen to music and you would get inspiration. That is relaxation for me. I believe reading is education regardless of what you are reading, so I cannot particularly call it relaxation. I also play chess.

What is the happiest day of your life so far?

I would say that my happy moments are when I started getting awards for the works that I have done because when I started, it was a risk. I did not have inheritance or trust funds so there was nothing to fall back to. I was stepping into a place that was business oriented and I would be training people that would not pay me. It was very risky but to be recognised by people in Nigeria for doing this, I was happy. I am also very happy anytime I see our girls move from a stage where they had never touched a computer before to debugging or solving errors in a line of code because we literally started with little or no budget. It is a beautiful moment.

Where are some of your favourite vacation spots?

I cannot call the places I visited vacation spots; I have been to Dubai, America, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa but they were not for vacation. However, South Africa was fun and I love Port Elizabeth in South Africa. It is a tourist attraction with a very beautiful and relaxing environment. I also love Florida, Miami.

What do you do to treat yourself?

Before I think about treating myself, I think of people that do not have food to eat. Before I buy anything for myself, I think of how many people that money can help. I am in a space whereby my conscience is at work with me. I cannot solve the world's problem; neither can I change everybody from bad to good but at the same time, I know that I rarely cut myself that slack. There are many things I can buy with my money but I do not because I think of other people that have not eaten.

It means you do not even visit the spa to relax a little?

I think I have been to a spa in my life only three times. I know it is something I am supposed to do often with the way we sit down from morning to night and jumping from one slum to another IDP camp but unfortunately, I do not think I would leave where I am and go a long distance in search of a spa. If there is none around me that I can have access to and is affordable, then I would not do it.

How did you meet your husband?

We met at work; we are both in the same IT space. Someone referred me to him to get something done and when I got to him, he was with about five of his male friends. I did not know them neither did they know me and I did not want them to start any conversation with me, so when they asked me about my occupation, I told them I was a fashion consultant. I knew the moment I said that, they would leave me alone and that is what happened. If I told them that I was a techie, the conversation would have lasted for up to five hours and I did not want that. The rest is history.

At what point did he realise that you were not a fashion consultant?

It did not take too long. We kept talking after the day we met and from my conversation and the terminologies I was using, he realised that I may not be a fashion person. I later gave him my profile.

How is your home setting like since you and your husband are both techies?

We are always on the computer.

How do you communicate with each other?

It depends. If either of us was not a techie, maybe there might be a slight problem because he would be on the computer and I would not be happy. But we both understand ourselves. There are times we drop our computer and go see a movie or drop our phones and have a conversation.

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