

A STERLING QUALITY

**The luminous life of
OGBUNECHENDO**

**HON. JUSTICE UMEGBOLU EMMANUEL OKOYE NRI-EZEDI,
CHIEF JUDGE (EMERITUS)**

Early Life and Family Background

Hon. Justice Umegbolu Emmanuel Okoye Nri-Ezedi, was called, affectionately and predictably, “Daddy” by his children. However, many outside his nuclear family also addressed and alluded to him as “Daddy.” That fond designation was borne of his indiscriminate paternal benevolence.

He was born on January 2, 1943, into a family characterised by two P words: polygamous and prosperous! Daddy’s father was Chief Nwokoye Anene Nri-Ezedi (*Enyivuaku*), an Ozo title holder, a man of affluence and influence, an indigene of Uruoji Village in the ancient Nri Kingdom of Nigeria’s present Anambra State. The imposing paterfamilias, “Enyivuaku” married three wives.

Daddy was the first son of his father's second wife. She was Madam Chinwe Nri-Ezedi (Nee Ubah), who hailed from Agbadani Village, Nri. In the 1960s, with her first son bewigged and begowned, she exulted in his professional status. She was widely acclaimed as “Nne Lawyer” (mother of a lawyer), with the further agnomen “Apili”, which was probably an indigenous version of “Appeal.”

Daddy had two full siblings – an elder sister and a younger brother – and several half siblings. They are mostly deceased. The offspring of Enyivuaku overcame the customary blights of polygamous milieux – bickering and rifts – attaining harmonious co-existence. Their amity made the Nri-Ezedi family impregnable.

Early Education and the Hand of Providence

From a young age, Daddy manifested exceptional brilliance and a craving for learning. Indeed, his eventual distinction was apparent from his infancy. Recognizing his potential, a relative then working in Aba enrolled him at Christ the

King School, Aba. He commenced his primary education there. The kinsman-mentor however shortly left Aba, obliging Daddy to return to Nri.

He resumed his studies in that rural domain, the antithesis of cosmopolitan, bustling Aba. Although his father “Enyivuaku” had no formal education, Daddy’s academic venture flourished. An uncle, Mr Donald Igwbudu Nri-Ezeadi, educated and prosperous, would play a decisive role in Daddy’s development. Appraising the lad’s schoolwork, the lucidity of his thinking and elegance of his handwriting impressed him.

Donald Nri-Ezeadi took Daddy under his wing, relocating him to Onitsha, and became his lifelong mentor and benefactor. His investment in his protégée’s education and wellbeing was unstinted, extending from Nigeria to his studies in England.

Blossoming in Onitsha

Onitsha proved tremendously transformative for Daddy. He was undaunted by the metropolis; his earlier sojourn in Aba had no doubt accustomed him to life in a colonial “township!”

Daddy attended St. Mary’s Primary School, Onitsha. On completing the then esteemed Standard Six, he obtained his First School Leaving Certificate in 1954. He duly continued his studies at Christ the King College (CKC) Onitsha, where his talents became manifest. He excelled both in studies and in sports, a gifted quarter-miler. Representing the CKC in numerous competitions, his accolades attested his discipline, zeal and industry. Until the end, he cherished the photographs he took with his teammates and their Irish coach.

Further Academic Pursuits: Fulfillment of the Aspiration to Study Law

After Daddy graduated from CKC, he continued to burn the proverbial night candle in his earnest desire to study law in the UK. Until sometime in the 1960s, there were no institutions for the training of lawyers in Nigeria. Daddy in his quest had a role

model in his relative, Chief Philip Ezebuilo Umeadi, SAN. Umeadi had been called to the Bar in 1957, the first Nri indigene to qualify as a lawyer. Daddy pursued private studies in Economics and the English Constitution. In 1961, he sat for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level examinations, which he passed with distinction, earning him admission to study Law at the University of London.

Daddy graduated from the University of London with a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) with honours in 1964. In 1965, he was called to the English Bar at the Inner Temple. His name was accordingly entered on the Roll of Barristers of the High Court of Justice, Queen's Bench Division in 1965.

He would no doubt have identified with the raptures of the operatic duo, Gilbert and Sullivan, expressed in *Iolanthe*:

*The Law is the true embodiment
Of everything that's excellent
It has no kind of fault or flaw
And I, my Lords, embody the Law.*

As a lifelong learner, Daddy immediately enrolled in a postgraduate program and earned his Master of Laws (LL.M.) from the same University – London – in 1966. When in lightsome mood, he would brag to his family that he obtained his “*Li-Li-Mi*” from London!

Still flush with academic fervour, he commenced a PhD program just before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. However, Chief Philip Ezebuilo Umeadi, SAN, felt it was time that Daddy concentrated on practice at the Bar, and urged him to return to Nigeria.

Daddy duly complied. Before the carnage of war devastated his homeland, he abandoned his PhD project to settle in Nigeria, eager to support his family and relations. During the war, Daddy attended the Biafra Law School, obtaining the professional diploma of the Republic of Biafra's Council of Legal Education. At the cessation of hostilities, he proceeded to the Nigerian Law School, Lagos, successively completed his professional training and was called to the Nigerian Bar in 1971.

Daddy's Law School sojourn in Lagos was hugely eased by a certain bosom friend. Prince Ben Egwuatu Okolo, the patriarch of the Eze Nri Ubalike family, gracefully accommodated him in Lagos. Daddy remained ever grateful to the Prince, who has now attained – and exceeded – the venerable milestone of 100 years. Prince Ben Egwuatu Okolo was a special mentor, friend and big brother to Daddy. His lamentations at his former protégée's demise have been intense. He grieves that Justice Nri-Ezedi should have buried him but has now preceded him to the hereafter.

Daddy and His Heartthrob – Love that Stood the Test of Time

Daddy met the love of his life, Constance Izualor Okafor, whom he fondly called *Connie*. Only Daddy had the right to address her as *Connie*. For us their children, we call her Mommy, with due respect. She is a core disciplinarian just like Daddy. Mommy is from the reputable family of Okafor Nwaononikpo of Umuochiogu kindred in Obeagu Village, Nri.

Daddy met and fell in love with Mommy quite early in life. Whilst in Nri during holidays from CKC, he would walk past Mommy's family compound to visit his childhood friend, Late Edmund Okoye. Whenever he spotted Mommy, who was then a little girl in elementary school, he jokingly told his friend Edmund, "*One day, I will marry that little girl.*" What began as a playful remark would quietly take root.

Although Daddy's academic journey took him away from the village, the seed of love had already been sown. By a twist of fate, they reconnected in Ibadan in 1960. At that time, Mommy had blossomed into a graceful and intelligent young lady. She was a student midwife at the Sacred Heart Hospital, Abeokuta. In August 1960, Mommy travelled from Abeokuta to Ibadan to attend a friend's wedding and met Daddy in Ibadan. That chance meeting rekindled their bond in the most beautiful way.

Daddy and Mommy began to spend time together, sharing stories, dreams, and hopes for the future. It was in those moments that Daddy spoke tenderly of his desire to study Law in London, a dream that Mommy took to heart and guarded with quiet devotion.

Mommy, following her own dreams of becoming a British-trained nurse, would leave for London before Daddy. When Daddy eventually arrived in London, their love blossomed even more, deepened by shared aspirations and the exhilaration of a foreign clime! Mommy duly qualified as a registered nurse in the UK, while Daddy qualified as a lawyer.

Events however would test their love. After his return to Nigeria at the onset of war, Mommy remained in Britain. Communication became difficult. Their bond, however, endured. Eventually, Mommy returned to Nigeria by sea on May 10, 1970. She was among the first set of Nigerians to come home after the Nigerian Civil War. She fell into Daddy warm embrace. They had sorely missed each other.

They were married in 1971 at the Marriage Registry in Ikoyi, Lagos, and welcomed their first child, Chinwe, shortly after. Daddy established his legal career while Mommy worked with the Lagos State Hospital Management Board, later serving at the Railway Hospital in Ebute Meta.

The family later settled in Onitsha, where Daddy and Mommy thrived in their respective professions and raised their children in a home filled with love, discipline, and purpose. After decades of meritorious service to humanity, Mommy retired as Deputy Director of Nursing Services at Iyi-Enu Mission Hospital, Ogidi.

In their later years, they moved to Enugu, where they enjoyed a peaceful retirement in the ambience of their common legacies, basking in memories forged over a lifetime of love, resilience, and companionship.

Their love had weathered time and distance. Theirs was a love story admired by many. They were often alluded to as *twins*, with Mommy lovingly teased as Daddy's "handbag" because they were rarely seen apart.

A Distinguished Legal Career both at the Bar and on the Bench

Upon his return to Onitsha in January 1972, Daddy joined his esteemed relation, Late Chief Phillip Ezebuilo Umeadi (SAN), in legal practice. After a brief period, he opened his own law firm "Umegbolu Nri-Ezedi Chambers". An acute and principled legal mind, he built a solid reputation as a legal practitioner. Eschewing unethical practices, he was markedly conscientious as advocate and solicitor. By

dint of his unsullied reputation, he later formed a partnership, known as “Igguh, Nri-Ezedi Chambers”.

In 1993, Daddy was appointed a High Court Judge in Anambra State, marking the beginning of an exemplary judicial career. He made history as the first Nri man to be appointed a High Court Judge. He was the quintessential jurist, accommodating of young lawyers’ deficiencies, yet sternly focused and intolerant of laxity. The impeachment case of His Excellency, Mr. Peter Obi, then Governor of Anambra State, prompted an epochal phase of Daddy’s judicial career.

The Impeachment Case

Daddy’s professional tenacity, his resolution to do justice even though the heavens fell, was put to the severest test in the impeachment case of His Excellency, Mr. Peter Obi. Despite intense pressure and grave threats, Daddy proved unwavering in his commitment to justice. Many and concerted were the bids to coerce or cajole him to pervert justice. The bids failed, for he did not capitulate to the corrupt.

When the case file was unexpectedly withdrawn from his court, Daddy, in his characteristic humility and integrity, quietly stepped away from it, refusing to compromise his principles. However, the National Judicial Council (NJC) intervened to order return of the case file to his court.

Daddy proceeded to deliver a landmark judgment that upheld the rule of law and saved Anambra State from colossal injustice. Justice was enthroned, yet the heavens failed to fall! That episode confirmed Daddy as a judge both courageous and incorruptible.

In 2007, Daddy was appointed the Chief Judge of Anambra State, attaining another judicial milestone as the first Nri man to hold that prestigious position. He served with distinction and righted many administrative wrongs in the judiciary. He retired in honour in January 2008.

Professional Affiliations and Community Involvement

In addition to his distinguished legal career, Daddy was active on other professional forums. These reflected his global perspective and commitment to justice. Before his appointment to the Higher Bench, he was a zealous member of the Nigerian Bar Association, Onitsha Branch. He was also a member of the London Institute of International Affairs.

Daddy's Iconic Achievement and Personality

In 2016, Daddy was honored for his outstanding public service in Anambra State, a recognition of his years of distinguished service and unwavering dedication. The acknowledgment brought him deep fulfillment, and he remained profoundly grateful to God.

Daddy's personality was an embodiment of wisdom, dignity, and quiet strength. To him, education was not merely a value – it was a sacred duty. He believed that knowledge was the great equalizer, the one true inheritance that could never be taken away. With this conviction, he was intentionally present in the lives of his six children. He was a firm but affectionate paterfamilias. At home, excellence was no mere expectation but a way of life.

His unwavering belief in hard work and discipline bore fruit, as each of his children excelled in their respective fields and are upright citizens. Even in his later years, he extended his fatherly solicitude to his grandchildren, adamant that the values he upheld would echo across generations.

Daddy, it is iterated, exuded unfaltering commitment to excellence. He had the incredible gift discerning people's potential, often before they could see it in themselves. He abhorred laziness and laxity. Many, on initial or casual acquaintance, misunderstood him, unable to fathom his expectations. When his stance resulted in success, they appreciated its wisdom.

His credo was simple yet profound: "There is no failure in hard work." To Daddy, excuses were worthless. The factors he esteemed were effort, resilience, and determination.

Apposite to his conviction was the declaration of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.*

To be among Daddy's children was to understand that striving for less than excellence was not to be considered. His discipline extended well beyond academics. He and Mommy instilled in us the value of self-reliance. As we were raised, we worked the land, growing our own food and embracing the dignity of labour. While peers may have teased us about Daddy's strictness, in the end, we reaped the fruits of his sternness. His training, though firm, became a blueprint for success, even to the quiet admiration of those who once misunderstood him.

To be his friend was to be challenged to grow beyond limits you never imagined. And to be within his circle meant embracing one undeniable truth: you would succeed, because failure simply was not allowed. His precepts influenced not merely his family, but an entire generation of people privileged to learn from him.

Beneath his tough veneer was a deeply compassionate soul. Though he carried himself with strength, his tenderness was sometimes evident, especially within his family.

Mommy, inwardly, was an even stronger person than Daddy. When two of their children were gravely ill, the challenge was not only their recovery, but how to inform Daddy of their indisposition. When finally he learned of it, his reaction was as would have been expected. His profuse tears expressed his unfathomable tenderness towards his offspring. In this respect, he was, perhaps, the weakest in his family. That arresting fusion of apparent strength and utter softness was a hallmark of his character.

Beyond his relentless pursuit of excellence, Daddy was a man of profound humility. His approach to life exemplified the Igbo proverb "Ezi afaka ego" (*a good name is worth more than wealth*). To Daddy, wealth was worthless if integrity was compromised in its acquisition. He believed that true fulfillment came not from possessions, but from a life of honesty, diligence and repute. He continually exhorted us to keep our hands clean, stating that money might confer comfort, but a good name bestowed peace and enduring contentment.

Daddy was not merely an accomplished man; he was a force of nature. A beacon of wisdom, discipline and principle. His presence roused respect, not through peremptoriness, but character. It was that character that made him a revered judge.

A Quiet Philanthropist

Daddy touched countless lives. He considered the benignity of his benefactors his exemplar. Daddy gave generously, never for recognition, but out of a deep sense of purpose and responsibility. He sought opportunities to uplift others, often supporting people unknown to his immediate family. He charged his family to always be charitable. To Daddy, charity was a creed which we all had to espouse.

A Life Rooted in Family

Daddy was not a man of many friends. He leaned towards quietude and introspection, confining himself to meaningful and impactful friendships. One such edifying bond was forged with the late Hon. Justice Eugene Chukwuemeka Ubaezonu, CON, JCA.

Daddy was a devoted husband to his beloved wife for over 54 years. His world revolved around his family; he found his greatest joy in it. In December 2019, at his request, all his children returned home with their spouses and grandchildren, filling the house with joy and shared memories. Again, in December 2024, most of his children with their spouses and the grandchildren came home for another celebration, which culminated in what would become his final birthday celebration, on January 2nd, 2025.

Surrounded by love, Daddy made a touching request that Mommy, his children and grandchildren join him for what would now be the last dance with Daddy on earth. That dance, unbeknownst to us, filled with grace and quiet farewell, has now and will forever be a sacred memory for the family.

Final Years and Enduring Legacy

For many years, Daddy cherished and answered with pride his father's Ozo title name, "Enyivuaku". In 2022 however, he was formally initiated into the prestigious Ozo Society of the Ancient Nri Kingdom, receiving his own Ozo title agnomen, "Ogbunechendo": an expansive tree that shelters many. That title summed up Daddy's life as a silent philanthropist.

He was a protector, a mentor, a man of deep principle, and a guiding light whose influence will continue to echo for generations. As his loved ones gather to honour his memory, they do so not only with sorrow, but with profound gratitude for the extraordinary legacy he left. His life was a masterclass in perseverance, and his teachings served as a roadmap to greatness.

Though his passing is painful, his family finds comfort in knowing that his legacy endures in the lives he shaped, the justice he upheld, and the boundless love he gave. His was not a life of unfulfilled dreams but a life poured out fully, faithfully, and honourably.

Perhaps Daddy's greatest lesson of all was the wisdom to know when a journey was complete. He embodied contentment, the rare grace of a man who knew he had lived well and fulfilled his purpose. He was never afraid of death. He met it with quiet readiness, knowing he had given his all to his family, his profession, his community, and the values he held dear.

In his final days, when weakness became evident, Daddy gently declined hospital care, preferring the quiet dignity of home. Only on the doctor's eventual insistence would he go to hospital. That hospital visit, as it turned out, was the end, as Daddy did not return home. Daddy however, was ready to return to God Almighty.

As God would have it, Daddy transitioned peacefully on March 8, 2025 with his family gathered around him, both physically and virtually: a final gift of unity and grace.

Although his passing is agonizing, his loved ones are solaced by knowing that Daddy was prepared for the great transition. His life was not only long, but profoundly purposeful. A life of service, love and unwavering conviction. A life that now inspires those he left behind to carry forward his legacy with courage, compassion, and faith.

Daddy, you lived with purpose, loved with depth, and led with quiet strength. Your legacy is engraved not just in the records of justice, fairness and equity, but in the hearts of all who knew you. We miss you dearly, but we carry your light forward with pride, with gratitude, and with love.

The refrain of Horatius Bonar's hymn, *Fading Away Like the Stars of the Morning*, are recalled:

*Only remembered, only remembered,
Only remembered by what we have done
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling
Only remembered by what we have done.*

The deathless lines of the greatest bard, William Shakespeare, are an appropriate farewell:

*Good-night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.*

Rest well, Ogbunehendo. Adieu, our beloved Daddy. Your work is done