

# THE STORIES: TINU



First name: **TINU**

Last name: **ACHIOYA**

Age: **43**

Country of origin: **NIGERIA**

Living in **Ireland** since: **1999**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Tinu was born into a political family in Nigeria. Her father was a politician in Nigeria. In the 1990's in Nigeria there was a lot violence between political parties, kidnappings and murder were not uncommon. This was a time when Nigeria was transitioning from military rule to democracy. The international community were not helpful during this time of transition as the status quo with military rule favoured corrupt oil deals with foreign entities. Tinu was newly married in 1999 and her father who was educated in the UK in the 1950's had good Irish connections and had visited Ireland during this time. Tinu also had sisters already living and settled in the UK. Tinu's decision to migrate to Ireland was heavily influenced by the Irish nuns who educated her and who were also returning to Ireland at this time in the late 1990's. Tinu's is a qualified architect. When Tinu arrived in Ireland she was based in Kenmare direct provision center while her application was being processed in the 2000. In contrast with what happens today, people in direct provision having to wait for years sometimes up to 7 or 8 for work permits, Tinu was able to find employment almost immediately. The very strong local community embraced

the new arrivals and insisted that they be allowed to work regardless of national policy. The community elders in Kenmare immediately recognised the skills people such as Tinu possessed and insisted they be allowed work and integrate themselves into their new community in an organic natural, normal way. Tinu has drawn on this first positive experience of Ireland over the past 17 years as a very prominent activist helping other Asylum Seekers in many locations and situations across Ireland, influencing policy at government level. Tinu is currently employed as Programme Director of Cultur. Tinu joined Cultur in 2016 as a Project Manager and has over 14 years' experience working with NGO, public sector, government funded projects including providing training support and facilitating cross cultural community dialogue within delicate and challenging contexts. Tinu has a degree in Community Studies from Dundalk Institute of Technology and MPhil in Conflict Resolution & Reconciliation from Trinity College Ireland.

**“... IN KENMARE WE WERE SO MUCH LIKE THEIR BABIES.”**

## TINU'S STORY CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Tinu's father was a politician in Nigeria in the 1990's and Tinu and her family were pro-democracy and against military rule. In the late 1990's Tinu's father decided to leave Nigeria for personal safety reasons. Kidnapping and violence linked to politics was commonplace during this time of transition in a society with a long history of military coups and natural opposition to the democratic process with many complexities which are beyond the scope of this article to explain. To help the reader gain some insight into Nigerian political culture

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we cite an article by 'Human Rights Watch' *"The use of violence as a political tool has been common in Nigeria both before and since President Obasanjo first came to power in 1999. The 1999 elections were also marred by violence and intimidation, as well as widespread fraud and rigging. Previous Nigerian governments had used political violence even more brutally and systematically, often without any real pretence of operating within a democratic system. Despite the shift from military to civilian rule, political has remained prevalent. It has been facilitated by the wide availability of small arms and a large population of unemployed young men who are willing to be hired and armed by politicians to intimidate their opponents"*.

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY 'AT DIFFERENT TIMES & LOCATIONS'

Tinu's story about her first interactions with Irish people in Kenmare, in County Kerry compared to other locations in Ireland are worth highlighting here. In Kenmare, the local community embraced Tinu and her colleagues. The natives of Kenmare were adamant that the new members of the community from the direct provision centre could be fully integrated into the local community generally and the workforce immediately. They actively encouraged Tinu for example to go and seek an interview for a job in a local architect's office as there was a shortage of skilled architects at this time (early 2000's) due to the massive boom in the construction industry in Ireland. This experience mentioned earlier is a revelation to me when compared with the depressing story about how people are suffering in direct provision centres today, with totally unacceptable long delays and barriers to fundamental human rights such as the right to work and education.

Tinu spoke about how supportive her work colleagues were in Kenmare

and how well she was received into the architectural community. Indeed they were fascinated by this exotically lady from Nigeria asking *"could I feel your skin... a lot of people there have not seen a black person before"* Neighbours would offer Tinu lifts to go shopping and were very helpful... *"we were like their babies"*. It is worth noting at this point that even though Tinu did not have her official work papers the local community over-ruled the government official and allowed her work in her chosen profession.

Tinu moved from Kenmare to another town in the north east of Ireland (a border county) in late 2000. Her initial experience here contrasted greatly with Kenmare, racism was rife in their new location. They were confronted face to face and told *"go back to your country"* children were bullied in schools and walls used for racist remarks... *it was hell then"*. It was at this time that Tinu and some other women started the 'Louth African Women Support Group' to have one voice. Tinu felt that the racism was due to a lack of basic information about them... the Irish government had not provided any information about them to the local people... *"The locals were only listening to the local media's bad publicity about them etc. "you are taking our jobs"... you get new buggys etc."* Tinu also attributes the border county hostility towards them to their own history of conflict in nearby northern Ireland.

In an effort to counter this racism Tinu and her colleagues began to visit local primary schools to teach young children about her (Nigerian) culture. Tinu drew strength from her previous positive Kenmare experience and believed that the community would understand them better with a bottom up approach by interacting with them face to face. This approach had a positive impact on the wider community, the racist attitudes seemed to abate. Tinu's

**I started a group for women to give ourselves a voice.**

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school initiative started a conversation as children from the school would go home and tell their parents about Tinu's culture. Tinu began work with the HSE as a community mother visiting new mothers from the migrant community. In the following years Tinu also advised the HSE on a wide variety of issues affecting migrant families.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

While working with the HSE Tinu continued her voluntary work with the Louth African Women's Support Group. The situation for women in direct provision can be tough because their husbands who are the traditional bread winners in their home countries but are not allowed to work here in Ireland. This situation brings added pressure on women who are married or in established relationships with families. Tinu obtained support from Dundalk IT who welcomed Tinu to visit classrooms and talk about their situation in Ireland. Tinu also worked on the cross border center for community studies where she met her mentor Ann McGeenery. Tinu worked there as an ethnic minority officer, this initial voluntary work led to paid employment and opened up some funding opportunities. Her core work was to consult with all relevant organisation in the county to help Asylum Seekers and Migrants obtain qualifications to add to their existing qualifications to help them transition into the workplace when they were legalised. Tinu is a true role model in any context and an inspiration for us all.

**I visited classrooms and talked about the situation of refugees in Ireland.**