

## Milestones

### **An Ode Arc. Frank Mbanefo**



Nigeria and the Christ the King College Onitsha family lost a very dear senior member and an elder statesman of the alumni association recently. **Architect Frank Nwobuora Mbanefo** (Akunne) passed to eternal glory on 23rd April, 2015. An eminent old boy of C.K.C. Onitsha, he belonged to the C.K.C. Class of '48. Arc. Frank Mbanefo served as the President-General of the Christ the King College (C.K.C.) Onitsha National Old Boys Association, for six years stepping down in 2009. He was an eminent member of the Nigerian Institute of Architecture (NIA), in good standing.

Under his proactive leadership, the alumni of C.K.C. contributed to no small measure, to rebuilding their alma mater, spending close to N100 million to that end, in the run up to the school's Seventy-Fifth Anniversary in 2008. It was also under his leadership that C.K.C. Onitsha alumni led the campaign for the return C.K.C. Onitsha and other mission schools to their original owners; a demand that was realized on 1 January 2009, when Gov. Peter Obi of Anambra State handed back the schools.. It was also under his leadership that the C.K.C. alumni resolved that only alumni of the college or Catholic priests should henceforth serve as the college principal.

Until his death, Arc. Mbanefo's headed his architectural firm, Frank Mbanefo & Associates, one of the best known in Nigeria, which was based in the City of Enugu. Arc. Mbanefo, founder, proprietor and principal consultant of the firm, was also a former president of the Nigerian Institute of Architecture (NIA). Arc. Mbanefo was a product of the Russell Square Tutorial College, London and Municipal College, Southend-on-sea, England. On completing his professional studies, Arc. Mbanefo worked in England from 1956-1960 before returning to Nigeria where started his Nigerian architectural practice in Lagos in 1960.

Arc. Mbanefo was an artist and an artiste in every sense. A man of immense warmth, discipline and process, he founded as a student of C.K.C. Onitsha, the school's first cultural dance group, which he led. He was also one of the first students that engaged in technical craft, specializing in carpentry. Arc Mbanefo's landmark professional work and designs can be found across Nigeria. He served the principal consultant to the Zik Mausoleum in Onitsha, and left his alma mater, C.K.C. Onitsha the enduring legacy of designing and supervising the construction of its present campus portal.

Arc. Mbanefo was passionate and unceasingly nostalgic about C.K.C. Onitsha. He was consistently pained by the diminution of the glory and influence of the college in the post-civil war period. Because he was fond of recalling the college's past glory, he campaigned proactively for the wellbeing of the college, declaring in 2008, *"my biggest dream is to get C.K.C. returned, in every respect, to its former glory, recognized for*

*academic excellence, and for molding young minds in to dynamic leaders. We are hopeful that returning the school to the Catholic Mission will ensure that we bring back the purity and drive of the college."*

Arc. Mbanefo was true to his vocational calling; a man dedicated to vision and process. He was all about details, planning and methodology. Once asked about the future prospects of his alma mater, he replied: *"Our next steps are twofold: firstly, to restore a high level of academic standards in the school, and ensure that this is matched with discipline, and secondly, to complete the renovations of the dormitories and administrative buildings which is an urgent priority to ensure that both teachers and students are in a conducive learning environment."*

Continuing, he said, *"I believe that we need to depend on our Old Boys abroad to help facilitate academic scholarships, raise funds for continued renovations and management of the school campus and facilities, and ensure that the school develops a competitive edge in the area of technology, laboratory sciences and equipment, as well as excels in sports."*

Mbanefo was a self-made man who nevertheless had a remarkable pedigree. His father and younger brother Arthur served as the Odu of Onitsha respectively. It is only those well nuanced in the Igbo language and norms that would appreciate that his home in Enugu, an architectural landmark, was named "**Ezuluagbo House**". The name spoke eloquently to his belief and homage to his worthy heritage and pedigree.

Well after he turned eighty years of age, Arc. Mbanefo walked erect and was as fit as a fiddle. His self-discipline, work ethics and physique belied his age. Of his personal orientation during his formative years at C.K.C., he once offered an insight: *"It wasn't all work and no play. I would rather put it this way: we were made to work hard and play hard!.... We were made to appreciate the meaning of our college motto.... by projecting to the outside world our keen sense of moral upbringing, our humble respect of fellow human beings and the environment (bonitas), as well as our high consciousness of law-abiding citizenry (disciplinas). We tried to learn and improve our academic achievements through an extensive school curriculum (scientia). Generally, we also strived to win as many laurels as possible in the field of sports."*

I was privileged to have known and worked closely with Arc. Mbanefo in my capacity as the Secretary of the C.K.C. Onitsha Alumni Association in America (CKC-AAA). In those years of constructive and efficient collaboration, I gleaned very revelatory insights into the man. His greatest attribute was that he remained until the very end, a dedicated and diligent teacher of life's lessons and architecture. He mixed well with the young and old and shared his knowledge freely. Indeed, any tad of discussion with Frank Mbanefo was enlightening, refreshingly joyful, a true privilege and a learning process. He spoke softly but articulately. He was well travelled, hence his rich repertoire of events, peoples and places. His passion for formed dance and sports, especially cricket – *a gentleman's game as he called it* --never deserted him. It was a rare privilege to have known this man, who combined his acute worldview well with his heritage and so, with great equanimity, warmth and genuine bonhomie. He left a great legacy, which will live on many years after he has left the scene.

This tribute can hardly do justice to Arc. Frank Mbanefo, who was all about service to common cause as a means to creating an enabling environment and improving life aesthetically and qualitatively. In fact, one could write an elegiac tome on Frank Mbanefo's pain of our collective failure to make Nigeria a better place; but suffice it to say that Frank Mbanefo played his part well and made his own positive contributions. For him, service was just a metaphor for life. The words by Alice his dear wife of over sixty years encapsulate the man: *"...his light continues to shine on us..."* He will be sorely missed. Fare thee well, Akunne!

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