

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Peace Of Mind Or Success? I Want It Both. Interview with Kojo Apiah Kubi (Brian Osanhene Duako in Chicago)



In Ghana they call me Kojo, Kojo Apiah Kubi. Back in the States I use the name Brian Duako, which is the name in my passport and also Brian is easy for Americans to pronounce. But now I'm back in Ghana and my mum says 'Kojo, you are home'. My family and friends make me feel so good, it's so sweet to be Kojo again!

I'm 35 years old and I was born in the village of Tanfiano near Nkoranza. After school I attached to an artist in order to develop my drawing skills which I possessed since early childhood. If people ask me who I am I say I am an artist. As a small kid in the village I would make drawings from anything I saw, houses, trees, faces, a village road. I lived in this small mud-house in Tanfiano and made drawings on all the walls included the ceiling and my parents said: 'you have talent!' I started developing that talent.

People were amazed at how well I would copy the scenes on paper. 'Kojo, good for you!' They would say. I did secondary technical education in Sunyani and then started my own art studio over there. For five to six years I worked happily and independently in my studio and by then I had my own apprentices who attached to me.

Then I got the chance to go to Chicago because my sister lives there and she helped me get the visa. Once there I went straight to school to work on my Bachelors in graphic designing. I got there when I was 26 and now have been eight years in Chicago. I like that city, it suits my taste. It was easy for me with the visa and I got married there and that way I also received a residence permit and now I am a USA citizen and a family-man with two kids. I had to combine

study with work and so I drove a taxi to finance my studies and help support my family. Nowadays I alternate times of studies at the university with time spent working. I work full time in graphic designing and screen making and I drive the taxi when I want to make some extra bucks. Last time, 4 years ago, I came with my wife and boy. Now I also have a baby girl, eight months old, so my family stayed home this time.

My wife is very interested in what you do here with the handicapped children. She works at the Howard community with handicapped persons and one day when the kids have grown she wants to come help you as a volunteer! She reads your website and is really interested.

Right now we don't know how to organize it, the kids have to grow somewhat, but we will come! My wife's mum is from Ghana and her dad is from America. The first time I came with my wife, 4 years ago, the experience was bittersweet. First of all I was of course so happy to meet my mother and the family but also it was a confrontation that was too hard. Now we are used to things different in USA and in Ghana it is not the same. I try to adjust. For example I cannot drink the water anymore without getting sick, that kind of thing. Ghanaian food however I love and thank God it never makes me ill.

Sometimes I get sad in Ghana for things stagnate in the village and I went ahead to live in another world. That too is hard to reconcile. I left Ghana and I come back four years later to visit, and again four years later, and every time it is a shock. The two worlds just don't compare. Although I don't have to be too sad for at a slow pace things do change. Mentality changes. Thinking changes. I sense a change of attitude in Ghana, it is coming and it is needed, imminent! Changes are happening now though Ghana, yes, though we still have a long way to go. I believe in Ghana's progress, no, I see it, for coming to Ghana every now and then you pick up the changes easier than when you live there all your life. But back to my family here; I find it hard to explain my situation in America for it is almost impossible to explain! Explain the subway! They think dollars are everywhere and never ever believe how I have to struggle. I understand them and forgive them of course for how could they know. But sometimes miscommunication is a problem. It makes me lonely here, at times.

To be frank with you if I decided to stay in Ghana again I want to do the same work, graphic designing. That is me! I do it here and I do it in Chicago. Now I do that full time in Chicago. I have a family in Chicago and I have one in Ghana that

is waiting for me to bring one thing which is money. I work very hard to fulfill all my obligations. My question is: do we at some time like to come back to Ghana with wife and children?

I cannot come back now, because of the family in Chicago. Yes, I wanted to go and learn and come straight back! But life went different and I now have a wife and children and then it became another issue. My wife supports me in whatever I do. In any case I can go back and forth every year or so.

Computer designing is my passion. When I was young I had no computer knowledge, all was by hand which I did well. In the beginning the computer designing was hard but gradually it replaced hand drawing and now I even feel lazy to lift my hand and draw with it! After graduating from school I worked at a sign company and then another one with the dual purpose of earning money to buy my own equipment and getting more experience. I succeeded and bought my own tools and started for myself. When I went to USA I wanted further education and a straight return to Ghana. Now I have a family, advanced skills and get a name and I have access to artwork in Ghana and in Chicago! As I said now I work freelance from my house in Chicago. Graphic designing, signboards, screen-printing and so on. I have a name in Chicago, especially among the Ghanaians but others too. My neighborhood is Rogers-park, a small Ghana.

You know from Rogers-park to Morse to Loyola University is now an all Ghanaian neighborhood and that's where I live and my countrymen know the quality of my art. I like living there and have many friends both Ghanaians and others. It is good to socialize with your own people and talk your language that makes you less homesick. I am happy to live in America, I say yes. It is very tough but better than here. Economically first of all. If you are forceful to do something you achieve your goal. I work from home and while my wife works out I can also look after the baby.

It is hard but we get by with mouth to mouth advertisement. You know what? I feel more at home in Chicago! Chicago is where my kids are. Also Chicago is no nonsense, go for it and do it. It is fair. I don't like to feel that way for home is home and that is where your mother is. My mother is here in Ghana. In Chicago however I feel at home and here I feel warm with my mum who calls me by my old name Kojo, so I am a world citizen!

I think about success and what it takes, life and what you make of it. I like to say: brighten the corner where you live. Just do something!

My brothers the African Americans her, hey man they live in the past. Talk about ages ago and slavery and beg for a quarter. I fight for a room and a job and I make it by myself. We think them strange the African Americans, nothing to do with us, who have style and dignity.

Here in Ghana you can have a dream but it is much harder to achieve. It's more relaxed living here for sure. But really, how can you relax when you can't make a living! A trade-off: peace of mind or success. I want both.

Here people have 2 dollar a day or less and they manage. In the USA there is more money but more stress. Money is important but peace of mind is the most important. I want both so what I do is keep my peace of mind wherever I am. Even in the taxi in Chicago. It is tough, you have to drive aggressively, people can be rough and all that. But hey if you need money you drive a bit and you overcome all stress for there is a goal to keep in mind. Money is not a goal, it is means to bring happiness to my family and to myself by starting my own business. I have a goal in mind: my own art-shop both in Chicago and in Sunyani. You see? Art, I live for art. In Chicago my business is settled. Now I want a business in Ghana again as well, that is my overall purpose.

In Chicago when I drive around in my taxi I always register stores that I could use, hey, here is a store where they have digital printers, here is a store to visit for more ideas, and so on. You know that makes life real for me. My purpose! Some Ghanaians in America drive a taxi for twenty, thirty years and do nothing else and then what. They become desolate and poor you know why?

They have no drive and no vision in life. They live from day to day and spend what they earn and if you are sixty you can't drive anymore and then you sit in a room. You cannot depend on your children like here in Ghana. You even see some of us begging, the old ones, 'Quarter, quarter, quarter, please'. Homeless. They did not have foresight. I do not agree with that and never understand it and always advise my people. Some are too far gone they really suffer. They cannot come back here to Ghana for they neglected their Ghana family and have nor even fare for a plane. And there they get old and lonely and it is not their culture. Sorry to see them. But mostly our people do well and are ambitious. Only few get old without

joy and with drink and in poverty. But look here too, you sit in the village and what do you do, some drink and complain and get more depressed! People need a goal in their mind and a driving force in the heart.

So before I return to Chicago next week I hope to start a business in Sunyani.

Four years ago my own old art-shop was still there, years after I left. I left it to my apprentices, family, but they did not do well and the shop collapsed.

I would want to staff the new art-shop with family-members but realize that I should not primarily help my family into jobs because they may steal and mismanage like anyone else. This time I brought a big machine with me and won't install it till I am sure of good management in my absence. The equipment is very expensive. I do not go to my family, I look for a reliable professional. I will find him, sooner or later. My family does not take this easy but in the end they will understand. Twice I have been cheated out of my shop which I set up, so no more friend and family services, I am after the professional. Now I have the equipment in my own room in my house here in Nkoranza and you know what? The design I made for your car, included the 'hand in hand' logo, that is the first thing I made from my machine in my own room. Nobody knows! This is how you start a business. You make things for people, a sign here, free, and signboard there, free, big or small, and people appreciate the work and the quality and they say who is this Kojo? Good, let me order some!

I've sent two people to Kumasi for training. Hopefully they can run my business after they complete their school. I go back in two three weeks and I like it here, there is no place like home. Wish I could come each year but you have to save money and my family is there too in Chicago. I wish that soon I could come again with the family and I wish that my wife would volunteer with the mentally handicapped children here. She would love it. You know quite suddenly Ghana has changed. You are here and you make a call and hear your wife and talk to her, you go to the internet café and look up the whole world, there is electricity, but you know what, there is a new way of thinking coming in Ghana! Even about mental handicaps and mental patients. They have somehow stopped about witchcraft and spirits. It is an important change. Now I work on two fronts. I bought this machine and brought it to Ghana. If not this year then next year when I come back. Next time I come I will also bring the largest digital printer. I leave in two weeks. I will email you. I am a world citizen. With a purpose.