Losing the guiding light in your life – the story of a father taken too soon by COVID-19

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“My father was my supporter, my friend and my role model. I remember when I was at university, I was having a bit of a hard time and my dad – as he always did – came to comfort and reassure me. This was emblematic of the relationship we had as father and son.”

Lobby Akinnola is very proud of his father, Femi, an emigrant from Nigeria, who worked as an engineer and was devoted to his family.

“He was a very intelligent guy, who always seemed to be helping someone. He was very funny and a real joker. When he wasn’t helping people, he loved spending time on his allotment. He also dabbled with photography and loved to listen to music, and was always singing in the house.”

Lobby lives in London, while his parents and younger sister lived in a town 2-hours’ drive away, but this didn’t stop them regularly communicating and seeing each other.

And when COVID-19 first hit Europe, the family became even closer, as Lobby remembers: “It was a strange period of time because me, my sister and my older brother had all recently gone through breakups. I’d also started a new job and was doing research, so it was exciting and there were lots of conversations about that”.

As the seriousness of the pandemic in the European Region became apparent, Lobby’s father was coming up with ideas for keeping people safe: “I remember him saying that perhaps we could have collapsible seats on buses, so people could more easily physical distance. That was the engineer in him – he just couldn’t help coming up with solutions to problems”.

The family were worried about catching the new virus, but most of the

concern was for Lobby, not Femi, as he was living in a big city and was considered clinically vulnerable because of 2 blood conditions. “There was a real chance that I might die if I got sick,” says Lobby.

However, it was his mum, sister and Femi who got really sick with COVID-19, all at the same time, and each had to isolate in different rooms of their house.

“It was difficult for me because I was in London and I could only get in touch with them by text because they weren’t up for speaking. It was a tricky time. We were more concerned about mum since she’s previously had health problems, and my dad had always been healthy. My mum and sister started getting better, so we thought that everything was going to be okay.”

But 3 or 4 days later, Femi was still feeling ill. Then, he found some blood in his saliva. As ever, Femi was looking out for others, even while he lay ill in bed. Lobby received a text from his father containing a link to a research paper suggesting that COVID-19 could live on surfaces and be spread that way. He urged his son to be careful.

Then, one sunny Sunday morning, he got a call from his mum. “I was expecting her to say something like ‘I’m up, Dad’s up and everything’s fine, we’re all good’, but I could hear this noise in the background and thought it was my sister laughing.

“Lobby, Femi’s gone,” his mother said.

“My sister wasn’t laughing, she was wailing. I collapsed onto the floor.”

Lobby then raced to his parent’s home as quick as he could, fearful his father’s body would be taken away and that he’d never seen him again, robbing him of a chance to say goodbye.

“There he was lying on the floor,” says Lobby. “It was real all of a sudden. I can’t describe how it felt. Literally one second my life had been fine, the next it felt like it was over.”

As the family tried to process the grief that swept over them, they blamed themselves for not doing enough to help Femi. “Because he didn’t go to hospital there was a sense that we didn’t do enough to get him the care he needed. What more could we have done? How could we have saved his life?”

Because of the ongoing restrictions, only immediate family were allowed at the funeral. “It was very isolating. People sent flowers, but it’s not the same.”

The death of Femi has had a profound effect on Lobby and his family and how they now interact with others: “In my family there’s definitely a sense of keeping distance. What has changed for me is this idea, prior to the pandemic, that if it doesn’t kill you, put up with it. People went to work with colds, flu and things like that and if you got it that was standard, but yet it could be debilitating for someone else. It doesn’t make sense to do that! It seems really strange that if you are sick, you would go into an enclosed space with people who aren’t sick. People need to understand that COVID-19 is real, and that it kills people”.

“We also need to be taking our cue from public health officials, independent bodies and scientists, doctors and nurses who are saying the pandemic is not over. There is still value in things we did before, like wearing a mask if you are in an enclosed space. Yes, it’s a bit inconvenient, but it could save your life, or the life of one of your family. You do not want to learn the hard way. You might not cause pain for yourself, but think about the consequences for other people.”

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