

## ***Opening Power to Diversity***



**Gladys Otono Atsenokhai**

**Placed with David Stanton TD from April 2013 to July 2013**

### **Biography**

An Irish citizen, Gladys is originally from Nigeria and currently resides in Co. Kildare. She has an M.A in International Communications from Dublin City University, a Diploma in Journalism from the Institute of Commercial Management and a B.A in English Language from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. Gladys also recently completed a course in radio research and production training for migrant women. She previously worked as an intern in a TD's office and has volunteered as a teaching assistant for the Athy Travellers Club. In Nigeria, Gladys worked for Africa Independent Television where she produced and presented the International Business News.

### **Diary**

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I had a brilliant introduction to a typical work day of a TD as I was caught right into the organised yet whirl world of an elected official. I am lucky to be working with David Stanton TD of the Fine Gael party. He is also the Chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality-an

enormous role with ensuing greater duties. Immediately after sorting my security pass, I attended a press briefing with David on penal reform in Ireland. Interestingly, it was not only a press affair as other interest groups were present at the brief alongside reporters. I watched as the members of the penal reform committee interacted with the press on recommendation of their submissions and the following chit-chat that followed after the meeting. This softer aspect of the meeting was a chance for everyone to interact and form probable networks.

Deputy Stanton is a dynamic, challenging and interesting person to work with. My first few days fly by easily as he introduced me to some of his colleagues on the floor. I curiously observed that the different parties are housed in separate buildings in Leinster House. This I imagine is to enhance privacy, confidentiality and perhaps keep political tensions to the barest minimum among people with different political ideologies. I immediately formed a relationship with some FG TDs and Miriam a FG administrator who is always willing and available to teach me the ropes (she showed me how to work the photocopying machine, gave me relevant administrative numbers and introduced me to other parliamentary staff). Core aspects of my duties include media monitoring, research on cogent policy issues that are pending before the TD or as requested and typing the odd document. I took the media monitoring upon myself so as to add value to my role as an intern as well as actively contribute to Deputy Stanton's work. A typical day starts with a brief discussion on current issues making headlines in the news. David is generous to request my opinion on most issues and is open to new ideas. I also assist in file management, answering phone calls and responding to queries.

In my near two months experience as an intern, I observed with respect the men and women who traversed the corridors of the building and the passion with which they carried out their responsibilities. I carefully noted the enthusiasm and pride with which they responded to queries from diverse people and organisations that reach out to them. I was astounded by the amount of work that passes through a TD's desk daily and the immense pressure to deliver both at constituency level and in the Dáil. Documents and submissions made by individuals, interests groups and organisations all seeking answers to knotty issues or trying to lobby for competitive advantage. In all, every submission and request is duly considered and not swept off as irrelevant.

So far, I have attended two meetings with Deputy Stanton, learnt the art of political communication by watching Dáil sittings, leaders and parliamentary questions, observed the nuances of the Dáil such as voting process among members and some terms closely associated with the procedure.

I am still very much enjoying this political learning experience though some days more so than others but the high points hugely overshadow the low moments which are majorly characterised by filing documents. However, filing has provided me with opportunities to read on issues that are driving debates in the country and keeps me up to date with current affairs. That in itself is not bad.

*"Most importantly, I have overcome my initial nervousness and now boldly approach and introduce myself to people."*

I find myself working in Leinster House at a crucial period in Irish history. Aside from Government efforts to reverse the tide in the property market and drive Ireland out of the economic downturn, the major issue driving the agenda among political think-tanks at this time is the highly controversial

abortion legislation. The review of the legislation is both sensitive and volatile even if discussed in the most temperate environment. You can feel the tense atmosphere among the various political parties as opinion varies on the rights and wrongs of the wording on the proposed bill looming over the Irish people.

It is no longer unusual to find groups or individual persons protesting outside Leinster House airing their grievances against the bill. I discovered that this form of protest right in front of Leinster House fulfils a series of purposes; the building is after all the centre stage of political decision-making and it provides a much required photo opportunity with the press who are always around searching for news scoop. So what better place to get your views heard!

Talking of scoop, I finally got the tour of Leinster house alongside other interns on the OPD scheme. Pat O Garner, our official guide was very entertaining and informative. His every word oozed pride as he described the building that rightly houses and defines the Irish people. Pat is one of the many ushers that effortlessly gives guided tours to visitors (I was glad to know the ushers get regular breaks as it must be tiring standing and attending to guests).

Leinster House is indeed the gateway to the heart of Ireland, given the calibre of people that walk through its corridors. I consider myself honoured to walk the same path as the people I would ordinarily see on television. I no longer get to flash my ID card or introduce myself to the ushers as I have become one of the people who wears the “elite” pass. Most importantly, I have overcome my initial nervousness and now boldly approach and introduce myself to people I had been drawn to in the media (I met one of my favourite political correspondents, TV3’s Ursula Halligan and TD Clare Daly). These chance meetings are also opportunities to talk about the OPD scheme which most have commended. I have also noted the curious stares amongst visitors when I walk past them in the hall. This in itself is good given the aim of the scheme which is to encourage DIVERSITY IN POLITICS.

Interestingly, I walked past the Taoiseach the other day in the hall. I was awestruck and torn between breaking through his entourage and giving him a hug but held myself back. My mind rightly guessed that it was too beautiful a day to be arrested for inappropriate behaviour! However, he did smile and say hello in response to my muddled greeting.



**migrant project**

