

IGE&FORUM 15.11.- 23.11. – A Duke Experience of a Different Kind

Who am I? What do I stand for? What is my purpose? And who do I aspire to become?

I was confronted with these questions on my very first day at the International Gold Event of the Duke of Edinburgh Award in Lagos, Nigeria. Questions so profound that they seem impossible to answer within a few minutes—yet essential to shaping what is known as an “Impact Statement”: a declaration of “who I am, what my purpose is, and how I will act”. Once defined, this statement becomes a compass—guiding you toward a purpose-driven life and marking the beginning of your leadership journey.

This realization was the first truly mind-blowing lesson I took away from the International Gold Event, a global youth conference that was uniquely combined with the DofE FORUM—an event traditionally reserved for staff members of the Award. The FORUM, held every three years, aims to strengthen the Award’s global presence and participation. In 2023, it took place in Lagos, Nigeria, from November 11th to November 23rd.

But let me start at the beginning.

After more than ten hours in the air and a layover in Istanbul, I arrived in Lagos alongside another German DofE participant and young people from all corners of the world. For most of us, it was not only our first time in Nigeria, but our first time on the African continent. Upon arrival, we were swiftly escorted through the terminal, our documents checked, and within half an hour we had left Murtala Muhammed International Airport. The airport felt as though it had been frozen in time—straight out of the 1980s. The bustling chaos of people searching for suitcases was striking, yet unlike in Germany, no one appeared stressed or impatient. No shouting, no panic—just quiet acceptance and adaptability.

A large white van took us to the Continental Hotel on Victoria Island, where we were greeted with refreshing drinks and warm hospitality. Although utterly exhausted, we gathered later that evening at the rooftop bar. Against the backdrop of the Lagos skyline, strangers quickly became friends.

For the first three days, the International Gold Event brought together young people aged 18 to 28 from across the globe, united by one common factor: participation in the Duke

of Edinburgh's Gold Award. Over the course of these days, we expanded our understanding of leadership, public speaking, pitching ideas, creating action plans, empowerment, and the global mission of the Duke organization. More importantly, we formed friendships that transcended borders—Australia, Canada, Nepal, Nigeria, the Czech Republic, Great Britain, and many more.

What struck me most was the openness of every single participant. Everyone was eager to share their experiences, challenges, and achievements within the Award in their respective countries. While in Germany the Award is often associated with private schools, in Kenya it is largely the opposite. These exchanges allowed us to challenge assumptions, support one another, and broaden our perspectives. The overwhelming sense of belonging to a global community was one of the most powerful moments of the conference—a spark of hope that the world's greatest challenges are surmountable if we face them together, as one humanity.

Following the closing ceremony of the International Gold Event on day three, the FORUM commenced on day four. It brought together staff members, trustees, and—most notably—Her Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh. Representing the German national organization were Vanessa Masing, the German National Director, and Barbara Ischinger, a member of the board. During the FORUM, we discussed the future goals of the Award and how it could evolve over the coming years. We also witnessed the Nigerian Duke programme in action through visits to a girls' school and two innovative Nigerian start-ups.

Equally inspiring were the leadership stories we encountered along the way. One quote resonated deeply with me: "When you walk and nobody follows you, you are merely taking a stroll. You become a leader only when others choose to follow."

The days were filled with workshops, discussions, speeches by Nigerian politicians, trustees, and HRH, as well as cultural performances. The evenings were no less memorable—welcome and farewell dinners, a night at Lagos' polo club, a glamorous gala, and my personal highlight: the Nigerian Excellence Dinner in the old parliament building in Lagos, attended by over 600 guests. The live music, performances, food, and atmosphere made it a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The end of the event arrived far too quickly. Yet our final day in Nigeria held one last adventure. For the first time, we explored Lagos without guides or schedules. We visited the vibrant Lekki Market, where vendors sell an astonishing variety of African art and

crafts—paintings, sculptures, metalworks, and more. To reach our next destination, we opted for the most authentic form of transportation: tiny vans with open doors, hailed from the roadside. Crossing the busy streets alone felt like an adventure in itself. Somehow, miraculously, we made it.

Our final stop was the Nike Art Gallery, owned by the renowned artist Nike Davies-Okundaye. One of the largest galleries in West Africa, it houses over 8,000 artworks by celebrated Nigerian artists. With that visit, our time in Lagos came to an end.

Every participant left with renewed motivation, fresh ideas, and a deep desire to create positive change within their communities. For me, it was one of the most inspiring weeks of my life.

None of this would have been possible without my role as a Youth Ambassador for the Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Youth Ambassador Programme empowers young people who have completed—or are currently undertaking—the Award to become advocates for the organization. Ambassadors share their stories, help shape the future of DofE, and influence social change on issues such as climate change and mental health. They represent youth voices at events, lead workshops, develop leadership skills, and gain invaluable experience in public speaking, teamwork, and campaigning—making a tangible impact on both their generation and the Award itself.

If you are interested in becoming a Youth Ambassador, feel free to reach out to me.