



Making a difference in his community

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At a time when most of his fellow Nigerians were going to Britain for medical training, 18-year-old Titus Owolabi chose Canada. He knew that the British and Nigerian education systems were very similar, but he wanted to go to a place that was not only English-speaking but also “refreshingly different.”

“Those were the days of Martin Luther King and Alabama, so the United States didn’t look like the most welcome place for a black young boy,” recalls Owolabi, now head of obstetrics and gynecology at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto. “Canada appealed to me as a country without the same history of racial strife and unrest.”

Owolabi, 53, recently received an African-Canadian Achievement Award for his medical work. The awards, founded by Toronto-based *Pride News Magazine*, have recognized the contributions of people such as Ontario MPP Alvin Curling, singer Salome Bey and author Austin Clarke. Tony Braithwaite, a Bank of Nova Scotia manager and Owolabi’s neighbour, nominated him. Braithwaite considers the award “extremely important because these people are role models within the African-Canadian community and in fact for all ethnic minorities.”

The award recognized Owolabi for bringing gynecologic laser laparoscopy to St. Michael’s. He quickly points out that he wasn’t the first Toronto doctor to use the procedure, and noted that he doesn’t even use the laser in laparoscopic surgery anymore. But learning and teaching the procedure, and winning the award, are important to him. “It’s an honour to be recognized by the community — by any community that you serve. The bottom line is just how much difference you make to your community.”

And being one of the first Toronto doctors to learn endoscopic laser surgery allowed him to teach the procedure. “I love to teach,” he enthused. Owolabi, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, is widely recognized for his teaching, earning consistently high ratings from undergraduates and residents; he has received a departmental award for teaching excellence.

“I think we achieve more by being good teachers than by being clinicians. Take laparoscopic laser surgery. I learned to use it because I liked it. It did not have mass appeal among my colleagues — the equipment was cumbersome and foreboding. But in fact, using it removed the

foreboding aura. It showed people the advantages of laparoscopic surgery without lasers and led to a rapid expansion of the instrumentation of laparoscopy.”

As an undergraduate, Owolabi was accepted into the biological and medical sciences course at the U of T and received advanced placement at its medical school. He was 1 of 4 African students to graduate from the school in 1971. Asked about any prejudice or racism he encountered, Owolabi stressed that “colleagues and mentors gave me no

reason to question their acceptance of me. By the time I had to deal with the public at large, and any prejudice they may have, I was in an advantaged position as a physician. Whatever prejudices there were didn’t matter to me.”

His mentors included U of T Professor Emeritus Walter Hannah, who says Owolabi “has a great deal of empathy with his patients. He’s a dedicated doctor recognized by peers and patients alike as an excellent role model.”

The middle of 9 children, Owolabi always intended to return home to practise, but it wasn’t until a decade after graduation that he did. He stayed for 6 years. “The civil war in Nigeria started when I was an undergraduate, and by the time I had finished my residency there

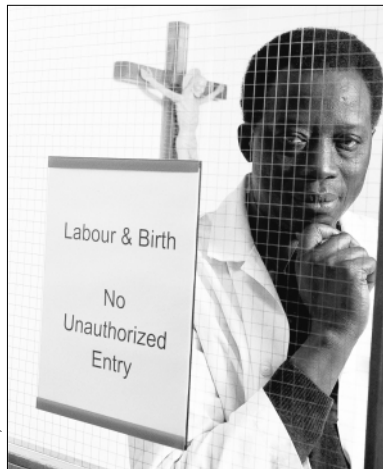
was *coup d’état* after *coup d’état*,” he said, explaining his delay in returning. As well, after graduation he felt he should gain a lot of experience quickly, so he spent 2 years as a consultant in Bathurst, NB.

He returned to St. Michael’s for 3 years before setting out, with a fellow U of T-trained Nigerian doctor, to establish a private, 20-bed tertiary care hospital in Ilesa, a city of 500 000 where a brewery is the main employer. The brewery provided medical coverage for its employees and Owolabi kept busy. Often he had to deal with extreme situations, such as delivering babies for women with cerebral malaria.

Owolabi became discouraged by the “unnecessary decay” he saw creeping into Nigeria’s infrastructure and health care system. He came to feel that any concrete contributions he could make would be “neutralized by malfunctioning of the infrastructure.”

Since returning to Toronto, Owolabi has flourished. So has his family. His daughter is a teacher, and 2 sons are gifted musicians and composers who both serve as church organists.

“As busy as he is, I’ve never heard of him missing a concert or recital by his children,” said neighbour Braithwaite. ❓



Dr. Titus Owolabi: role model

R. Bull, Toronto Star