

Umez honored for advocacy, humanitarianism

Awards from Houston African Community, others recognize service to Nigeria and diaspora

BAYTOWN, TX — Lee College government faculty member Bedford Umez left Nigeria more than 30 years ago for the United States, intent on completing a university degree and uplifting others through philanthropy borne out of the genuine care and concern for his fellow man that was instilled in him from a young age.

In the last year, Umez has received three awards for his advocacy and humanitarianism on behalf of his native Nigeria and the African diaspora. The Houston African Community presented him the Flamingo Award for Educational Excellence for his scholarly work and efforts to raise money for life-changing maxillofacial surgery for Maria Igwilo, an ailing and elderly Nigerian woman he met by chance at a Lagos church during a visit to Nigeria. The Igbobu Club of Houston honored him for outstanding and dedicated service to Houston's Igbo community, and he received the Oji-River People's Forum Award for his selfless sacrifices to advance the local government of Enugu State in Nigeria – in part by securing more than 2,000 signatures in a successful petition to make Enugu's local airport an international airport, and providing college scholarships for students in his hometown of Akpugoeze.

Yet despite these honors, the KFC Star Employee Award from his early days in the United States is among the few certificates Umez displays most prominently in his campus office. For him, the award serves as proof of the value of working hard at every endeavor.

Raised in poverty by a widowed mother who relied on subsistence farming and never received an education, Umez worked in fast food restaurants and won academic awards to finance bachelor's degrees in economics and political science from Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SOSU). Named the Most Outstanding Student in both economics and political science while at SOSU, he went on to the University of North Texas for graduate work and became a Teaching Fellow, earning a full scholarship for both a master's degree in public administration and doctorate in political science.

"This is a great country where a poor person like me can get a college degree," said Umez, whose mother borrowed heavily just to put him through high school in Nigeria. "God doesn't come down from Heaven to help people; he helps people through people."

To that end, Umez also sponsors a cash scholarship for the best student in Social Sciences at SOSU and is a strong advocate for effective, transparent and compassionate leadership. He credits his spirit of giving to his strong-willed, disciplinarian mother and the way she raised him and his two siblings to value hard work, honesty and empathy for others.

"Bad people must be confronted or else they remain bad," he said, echoing words his mother always told him.

For Umez, that means demanding good governance and justice from politicians, business leaders and those in power. When he learned in 2014 that Nigerian lawmakers were earning monthly salaries of more than \$140,000 while citizens lived in abject

poverty, he sponsored a petition that helped push legislators to cut their pay by 25 percent a year later. He also authored a petition to stop former Pres. Olusegun Obasanjo from borrowing \$1 billion from the International Monetary Fund, and petitioned against European airlines for overcharging African travelers.

A longtime educator who has taught at numerous colleges and universities, Umez has also been a Visiting Scholar to the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. He has published five books used as textbooks at Nigerian universities, written several articles on Nigerian and African political and economic development and reviewed books on American government and politics. He remains active in the Nigerian community and Diaspora, currently serving as president of the Nigerian Foundation in Houston and the Nigerian Leadership Council and coordinator of the Aguata High School Alumni Association in the United States.

Umez believes that leadership is action, not a position, and hopes the fulfillment of his educational dreams and commitment to philanthropy are an inspiration to fellow Africans and his students at Lee College and beyond.

“Nothing is really impossible to one who is willing to work harder,” he said.