

# Memoirs: The America I Saw

*Temitope Morenike Ojo is financially disadvantaged, but academically gifted. She attended Loyola Jesuit College, Abuja, on full scholarship following her excellent performance at the National Common Entrance Examination in 1998. She captures the whole essence of the United States Students Achievers Program. Morenike is presently a Pre-Med, year-two student of Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts. In this narrative, she recounts her first American experience.*

The voice of the flight attendant booms over the speakers as it heralds the arrival of flight NWL5102 from Amsterdam into Detroit Airport, Chicago. For many aboard the airplane, it was a normal route to end the long summer; but to me, it marked the beginning of a new life, a new phase, a new beginning. As I stepped out of the plane, I realized that I was entirely on my own with the responsibility of my future in my hands. It was pretty scary, but an intriguing sensation.

My first glimpse of America was on the television back home in Nigeria; however, now that I was standing on American soil, it was nothing like Hollywood movies where only famous superstars are featured. What I was experiencing were very normal people hurrying to catch their flights and running to meet their families after being away for a while. As I waited for my connecting flight to the international airport where my college classmates expected to pick me up, I acquainted myself with the environment around me. At first, I was so wary and skeptical about everyone that passed around me and had the notion that everyone was giving me a look over. After careful observation, I noticed that no one was concerned about my presence. Everyone was going about their own business, bringing back a sense of confidence, which was when I really held on firmly to the reality of being the master of my existence. In my mind, I convinced myself of not only surviving, but also triumphing in my new world.

After I arrived at Bradley airport in Connecticut, I collected my luggage and searched for people from my



*Morenike Ojo (right) with a classmate at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts.*

college, but saw no one. I got concerned and asked the information personnel to make an announcement. As the announcement rang over the speakers, the doors facing me burst open. I saw a trolley being pushed towards me by a lady wearing a smile and an orange t-shirt with "Welcome to MHC" written on it. She was here with some college students to take me and other new international students to Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts. I felt a sudden rush of relief and safety that brought me to the brink of tears. The welcome crew was very friendly and engaged us in conversation. The array of new students was very diverse. They were from France, Nepal, England, Spain, India, Ghana, and other nations of the world. Our group could pass for a UN gathering, save for our attire, and confused, and tired looks.

As we drove to Mount Holyoke

College, I looked out of the window and noticed a good mix of modern structures and old buildings. It looked like a travel back in time; only there were paved highways and travel routes and people in modern dress. My college is located in South Hadley, a small rural town with a large expanse of land compared to the small population. We traveled past farms with grazing animals, solitary houses, public establishments, convenience stores, and shopping malls. I was jolted out of my reverie when someone beside me exclaimed, "We are here!" There stood Mount Holyoke College in the early dusk of Friday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2006 looking like a benevolent mother welcoming her children into her safe haven. As we drove through the gates and towards the campus center, I looked at the features of this 170 year old institution, as I savored the idea

of making this place home for four years.

Four months and ten pounds later, I have completed a semester of Integrated Biology and Chemistry 160, Anthropology 105, and World Regional Geography 105. I joined the varsity track and field team, clashed with a different culture, made wonderful friends whose origins

could write a world history book, experienced unpredictable weather, and had headaches over meals that I could not relish. I have explored a wonderful community that exudes hospitality and love from the welcoming century-old buildings to the friendly faces of professors, staff, and students I encounter daily. The college workload is challenging but

enjoyable, as there are fun ways to learn and study in the classrooms. Also, the self-sufficiency of Mount Holyoke College assures me of receiving a fulfilling and top-notch education, as well as mapping out a terrific path for my future with the help of a selfless faculty.

I would be insincere if I say I do not miss my home back in Nigeria; however, I can confidently say that I have found a place where I know that all I have to offer as a human being can be cultivated and nurtured to reality, a reality that will affect the whole world around me in a positive way. Columbus called it the New World. Century-old immigrants have called it the “Land of the Free.” I call the United States of America my Land of Accomplishments, a place where my efforts will yield fruits that will awe the world.❖

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*U.S. Embassy Country Public Affairs Officer Atim George gives a pep-talk to students going for studies in the US during a pre-departure orientation session.*

## **The US Student Achievers Program (USAP)**

**T**he United States Students Achievers Program (USAP), was established in 2004 by the Embassy Educational Advising Center to ensure that all talented students, regardless of economic background, have equal access to information about merit-based international student financial aid and the admissions process to colleges and universities in the United States. These students normally require complete financial assistance to cover the cost of tuition, books, meals etc. In its first year (2004) USAP sponsored five Nigerian students, most of whom received full funding to various US universities.

USAP recruits students throughout Northern Nigeria on the recommendation of their headmasters

who require an extensive application process similar to that of highly selective colleges in the United States.

This year, more than 100 “O level” students from all parts of Northern Nigeria applied, and the EAC will select ten students who will enroll in fall 2007.

USAP students reflect the best of Nigerian youth, based on academic potential, leadership roles, community service and extracurricular activities. They aspire to broaden their horizons and return home to Nigeria.. Their only barrier to higher educational opportunities is finance.

The Educational Advising Center (EAC) works closely with USAP students to assist them at every step of the college selection, application, and orientation processes.❖

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## **Three Beneficiaries of U**

**T**he Educational Advising Center (EAC), US Consulate General Lagos on July 31, 2007 presented three Nigerian students who are beneficiaries of the United States Achievers Programs (USAP) at a press briefing in Lagos. The three students received four year scholarships to study in the United States as part of the USAP program.

Public Diplomacy Officer Mary Lou Johnson-Pizarro, and Education Advisor Ifeanyi Olagbaju explained the objectives of the USAP, launched last year at the EAC-Lagos advising center. The EAC works with ten intellectually-talented, but economically disadvantaged Nigerian students each year to assist them through the application process to secure admission and scholarships for colleges and universities in the United States. USAP works closely with students to increase their chances of admission and receiving scholarships.❖