



ZAINAB JAJI '13

*One Alumna's*  
Winding Road

to

**YALE**

Medical School

by Matt Thomas '00

Six thousand, two hundred and seventy miles. That's the approximate distance between Lagos, Nigeria, and St. Peter, Minnesota. It's a distance that is probably hard to comprehend for most Gustavus students, but it's a distance known well by alumna Zainab Jaji '13.

After growing up in Lagos, which is situated in the Southwestern region and major commercial state of Nigeria, Jaji says that she sought to venture out of her comfort zone when choosing where to continue her education.

"I wanted to explore the breadth of a liberal arts education that would immerse me in various subjects of interest ranging from the sciences to philosophy," Jaji says. "I decided to attend Gustavus and the College has helped me develop into a well-rounded individual."

Knowing that she wanted to one day pursue medical school and follow in her father's footsteps to become a doctor, Jaji and her parents wanted to make sure that Gustavus was the right place for her.

"At the time, my parents and I were very concerned about the prospects of my admission to medical school as an international student given the low statistics," says Jaji. "Jeff Anderson [international student services coordinator] assured me that Gustavus as a community would help me in whatever way it could as I pursued my dream of becoming a medical doctor."

The Gustavus community turned out to be the perfect place for Jaji as she flourished during her four years in St. Peter and was then accepted to several prestigious medical schools including Yale, Dartmouth, and Johns Hopkins.

Long before Jaji found herself filling out medical school applications though, she found a home at Gustavus and, with it, a support system that she says helped her get to where she is today.

"I really enjoyed the support and encouragement of the Gustavus community. Being an international student, I felt very much at ease at Gustavus," Jaji says. "I formed important relationships with students, administrators, and faculty. Heather



Banks guided me through my premedical pursuit, Virgil Jones from the Diversity Center was always encouraging me, and my advisers, Dr. Jeff Dahlseid and Dr. Florence Amamoto, were important mentors for me. The support system I had at Gustavus emboldened me to pursue various opportunities and search for ways to make a difference in the community."

One way Jaji discovered that she could make a difference was by participating in the College's Big Partner Little Partner program, which is based in the Center for Servant Leadership. After being introduced to the program by Professor Amamoto, Jaji participated in the program all four years with the same Little Partner.

**"The support system I had at Gustavus emboldened me to pursue various opportunities and search for ways to make a difference."**

# Jaji's interest in medicine was solidified during an experience at Gustavus that allowed her to shadow doctors at River's Edge Hospital in St. Peter.

"As the years passed, my little partner Anna and I developed hand-in-hand," Jaji says. "Each week we engaged in activities ranging from arts and crafts to playing games and doing assignments together on some occasions. As a Big Partner I was a role model to Anna. My experience in the program showed me that little actions make big differences and it demonstrated that I can positively influence someone else while having fun."

While being a Big Partner became a passion for Jaji outside of the classroom, inside the classroom she was excelling as a biochemistry and molecular biology major. One class in particular, CHE-360 taught by Professor Dahlseid, had a particular impact on her.

"For a science class, it took an entirely different format, which incorporated philosophical reflection into our collaborative learning of biochemistry," Jaji said. "It was indeed a capstone class not only because it challenged us to pool the knowledge we had gained in our various science classes, but it also inspired us to think about questions like "Why am I here?" and "Who am I?" The classroom setting taught me how to effectively work on a team and think critically about data presented. I was also introduced to thinking about science in the big picture in relation to its role with the fulfillment of one's purpose while fully considering its consequences on our world and environment."

Jaji says that she first became interested in medicine when she observed the immense amount of trust patients in Nigeria placed in her father regarding their health concerns. That interest was solidified during an experience at Gustavus that allowed her to shadow doctors at River's Edge Hospital in St. Peter.

"My most memorable encounter at River's Edge was when I assured a patient who was in deep pain that his doctor was giving him the best possible care," says Jaji. "For me, the universality of compassion in medicine and the creativity of medical practice are the main elements that captivated my interest in medicine. I see medicine as a career not only involved in restoring the health of a patient, but also maintaining the well-being of a community."

Those beliefs led Jaji to choose Yale when it came time for picking a medical school. "I have always wanted to study medicine through a holistic and multidimensional approach and Yale fully

incorporates my vision by integrating patient care, research, and education," Jaji says. "The curriculum is based on the premise that each medical student is a mature individual who can take the reins of his or her education. By taking a self-directed approach, I will cultivate the value of lifelong learning, which is crucial to sustaining a medical career. I also chose Yale because its system is geared toward grooming globally inclined and versatile physicians. An education at Yale will equip me with the tools necessary to improve patient care and help revamp the general health care system through a holistic and multidimensional strategy."

Thinking about revamping health care around the world is a lofty goal. Some would say it's a goal that seems about 6,000 miles away, but that hasn't stopped Jaji in the past and it likely won't hinder her in the future.

\*\*\*

*Matt Thomas is the director of media relations and internal communication at Gustavus Adolphus College. After graduating from Gustavus in 2000 with degrees in communication studies and history, Thomas worked as a sports journalist in the western suburbs of Minneapolis before returning to Gustavus in 2007.*

*Design and layout by Anna Franke '16*

