

Before I was given the opportunity to study and play basketball in the United States I attended school about six hours away from my home town. I was one of the lucky people from Delta State, Nigeria. Most people in that area do not have the chance to attend school. Few people have good jobs. Many of those that do have jobs have not learned how to spend their money wisely. Others that don't have jobs are not knowledgeable in how to go about searching for a job. There is much poverty in my home area and things do not look good for the future.

My mom used to tell me, "Education is most important." She said, "Focus on education because that is the only thing that will not leave you. It will stay with you no matter what." I have never forgotten this. For me, getting an education meant that I would have to leave my family behind in Nigeria. While this was hard to do I had no idea just how difficult it would actually be because I did not know at the time that I would never see my mom again. You see, she passed away just this past summer before I ever made it home for a visit. I had not seen her in over two years. I know in my heart that I was doing what she wanted most for me but that doesn't make it much easier.

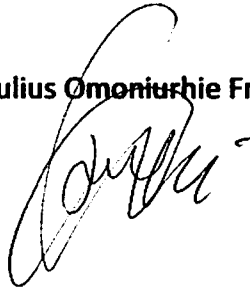
Being in the United States and getting an education has been one of the best experiences in my life. I am here to make a better life for me and all of the generations in my family that come after me. I am here to discover what I want to do in life and to be able to get a job that will help the people of Nigeria. It has also been a good thing for me to learn about people from other cultures so that I can take that back to Nigerians. I can explain to them how others live.

This past summer when I visited Nigeria for my mother's funeral I was asked to speak to the children at my old school. I was asked to talk about my educational experience in America. It was then that I noticed something different about myself. I realized that I spoke differently than when I first left Nigeria. I would say that I have become quite educated in a short time. Learning formal English has helped me to speak more intelligently. When I spoke to the students at the school I explained to them that although I play basketball if I don't have good grades there is no basketball. I emphasized that it is really about the education and not just about basketball. Someday basketball won't be there for me but I will always have the knowledge I have gained from my education. I have learned to be balanced and to put school work first. When I first arrived in America things were very difficult. I did not understand the way they taught, what the teachers were saying, and how much work I was to do. So many people did not understand what I was saying and I did not understand them. The language barrier was very hard for me. Sometimes things were bad and sometimes things were good. I did learn that sacrifice pays off and that it wasn't about playing basketball it was about getting an education. Without my American education I would not have had the courage or ability to speak before all of the students at my old school. My education has given me confidence and better communication skills.

Since coming to America, the first school that I attended has closed because they had no more money to keep it running. When I heard this news I was very sad especially for the young children from that area in Nigeria. It means that they will not have even a chance to be educated in Nigeria. After I graduate from college my goal is to return to that part of Nigeria and open a school for all children to attend. I want to work with the government to see that

there is no more poverty and ignorance in Delta State in Nigeria. My plans begin with a trip home this summer to take some books, school supplies, and other materials to the children in my neighborhood. I will also talk to them again about trying to get an education in any way that they can. Each year I will work more towards my goal of giving the chance of an education to all Nigerian children from Delta State.

Julius Omoniurhie Francis

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julius Omoniurhie Francis', written in a cursive style.