

Nigerians Wisdom Asaboro '19
and Justice Ajogbor '20 Radiate
Empowerment and Possibility

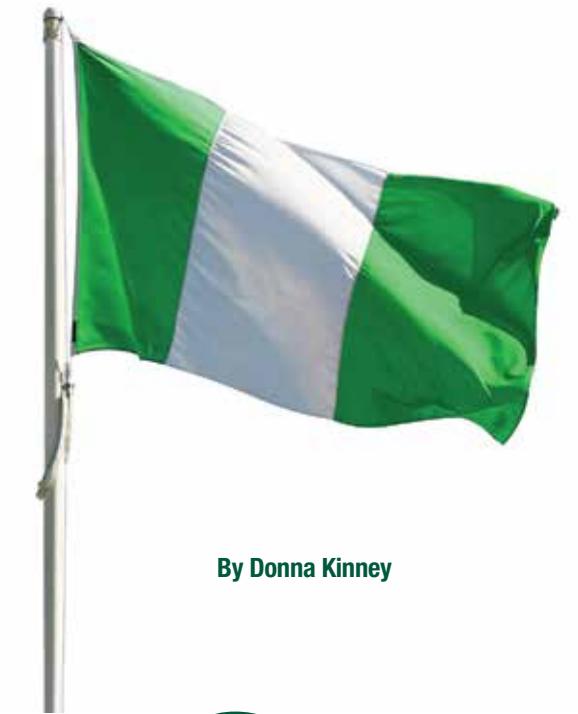
By Donna Kinney

GAME CHANGERS



The fact that Wisdom Asaboro and Justice Ajogbor towered over their classmates when they arrived on campus in August wasn't the only thing that set them apart. It was also that, in 85-degree heat, they were bundled from head to toe. Both from Nigeria, their thermostat is set a little higher than that of the rest of us.

Left: Wisdom, Juliet, and Justice meet Mason Plumlee '09 this summer at the first day of practice in The Greenie Dome.





Above: Greg and Gina Bridgeford P'15, P'18 visit with an A2S teacher's family in Nigeria.
Right: Justice, Jack '15, Jennifer Omonuwa (A2S sophomore at Concord First Assembly), Wisdom, Finn '18, and Juliet visit campus in August.



The climate would be the first of many adjustments they would make over the course of the fall. Easing their transition and serving as host parents for the boys and liaisons with Christ School are Gina and Greg Bridgeford, parents of Jack '15 and Finn '18 and board members of the Nigeria-based organization that helped bring Wisdom and Justice here, A2S (Access to Success).

A2S was founded by former basketball player and Davidson College graduate Andrew Lovedale. After leaving Nigeria to study and play basketball at Davidson, Lovedale was struck by the excess of athletic shoes each season. Where he came from, shoes were a rare commodity, costing more than a month's salary. He and his teammates began setting aside extra pairs. By his final season in 2008, when Davidson made the Elite Eight, he had collected 10,500 pairs of shoes and \$15,000 in donations to bring back home. Although A2S was founded in 2010 and run by volunteers while Lovedale was playing professional basketball in Europe, Lovedale decided to retire from basketball in 2013 to run A2S full-time and to make helping Nigerian children his life's work. The program includes an after-school

academy and a summer program in Benin City that combines academic classes, basketball, and Bible study. Its mission is to transform the lives of Nigerian children through academics, athletics, and faith in an effort to increase the percentage of students who achieve higher levels of education, and thereby reduce poverty.

The Bridgefords and A2S

An avid Davidson basketball fan, Greg Bridgeford followed Andrew's career at Davidson and watched him coach both of his sons in basketball camps. But it was after he helped out with an A2S fundraiser and met Davidson head coach Bob McKillop that he realized he needed to know more. He and Gina attended an information session that spurred them into action. "It really touched our hearts to hear what a difference A2S was able to make in these children's lives," Gina says. A self-described "doer," Gina was ready to step up. Greg had just retired, and the time seemed right to approach Andrew about hosting an A2S student here in the US. Upon further reflection, they decided to host two students so that they could support one another and not feel alone so far from home.



Both Gina and Greg felt that they needed to go to Nigeria to gain context and insight. So they signed up last summer as volunteers for the basketball and empowerment camps. During their visit, they also went to a refugee camp on the outskirts of Benin City and visited families of A2S students, including Wisdom's and Justice's family. Justice, whose parents died when he was 10, has two brothers and three sisters; he is closest to his sister Susan, who raised him. Wisdom has two brothers and five sisters.

Getting the boys here was challenging due to the obstacles in securing F-1 student visas on their first try. Both boys were turned down once. Wisdom was accepted on his second try when his father, who is a minister, accompanied him. He then boarded a plane for the first time and navigated his way through terminals and gates to fly alone to the States.

For Justice, it took three tries, finally getting accepted when his sister accompanied him. Greg flew back and forth throughout June and July to see the boys through the process, returning with Justice once his visa was issued. Greg points out that the Christ School administration was invaluable during that difficult time, putting in hours of emailing, phone calls, and Face Time sessions. "It never would have been possible without an amazing commitment from the administration and the staff at CS, and we are very blessed that this was possible," Greg says.

Adjusting to Life in the States

Wisdom and Justice spent a month with the Bridgefords in Davidson before beginning classes at Christ School, a time to acclimate to life here and adjust to their family. "They do call us Mom and Dad, and really our goal is not

Justice and Wisdom with fellow Cuninghamham students and staff.



Above: Justice and Wisdom with new friend Clarke MacDonald '21.

"Both players are incredibly coachable and supportive teammates. They don't care if they start, or how much playing time they get, they are enjoying being a part of the team and will only continue to get better."

—Bobby Long, Associate Head Varsity Basketball Coach

to be host parents but to integrate them into our family," says Gina. And they seem to be settling in quite well. A big LeBron fan, Wisdom is crazy about the color red. He sports red tennis shoes and a red backpack. Gina drew the line, however, when he asked for a red blazer. "He really lives out loud. He's funny and loves to have fun," Greg says. Wisdom has already attended two mixers at Salem Academy girls' school.

"Justice is more of a classic introvert," says Greg, preferring to quietly listen to music in his room. "We knew that he was getting comfortable when he started singing country music around the house." Kenny Rogers is his favorite. He discovered Rogers's "Coward of the County" when he was still in Nigeria and was drawn to the story. He's since expanded his repertoire to Don Williams, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Tim McGraw.

The Bridgefords' added a third A2S student to their family in August. Juliet Esadah has been in the U.S. for two years completing high school, and she just started as a freshman at Jones County Junior College in Ellisville, MS.

Despite the boys' height - they are both 6'9" - and mature appearance, they are really quite young. Justice just turned 15 in October and Wisdom is 16. They've been practicing with the

varsity basketball players since the beginning of school. According to assistant varsity basketball coach Bobby Long, "Both players are incredibly coachable and supportive teammates. They don't care if they start, or how much playing time they get, they are enjoying being a part of the team and will only continue to get better."

One of their biggest adjustments was getting used to the idea of a faculty that is interactive and caring. In Nigeria there is a strict divide between faculty and students, and faculty use harsh measures of discipline, including beating students with a stick for dozing off in class. Gina and Greg had to explain to them that the culture is different here and that the faculty at Christ School are devoted to helping them succeed.

When I sat down with Wisdom and Justice over lunch in Christ School's Stoltz Hall, Wisdom pushed aside his plate of pizza and confided that what he misses most from home is the food, especially black-eyed peas. "All of the food is different in Nigeria," he says, "even the fruits are all different."

Both had a hard time believing that a family would step forward the way the Bridgefords have and treat them like their own children. "I came from a really big family, so I never thought there would be people who would take in people who they never knew into their home and make them part of their lives," says Justice. Wisdom, who sketches designs of cars and engines, dreams of being an automobile engineer. Both are determined to get the best education possible.

It's not surprising that Gina and Greg, staunch supporters of everything Christ School, would find an affinity with A2S. "The really fascinating thing about this is that when you look at the Christ School mission and the A2S mission, they align so beautifully," says Greg. "In A2S they see sports as an incredible opportunity to develop a balance of body and spirit, leadership and respect. Christ School leans heavily on the Christian aspect of our mission. It just seems to be such a good fit to have these A2S students over here. They bring a unique view of the world, which I think will influence Christ School boys to look at things differently, having seen things through Justice's and Wisdom's eyes." ■

"Our programs are holistic and our goal is to Share Smiles. Inspire Hope. Empower Dreams."

—Andrew Lovedale



ACCESS2SUCCESS

The majority of the work that A2S does is based out of a church in a neighborhood in Benin City, Nigeria. Some 250 children of all ages (mothers often send their toddlers on the back of older siblings) show up every day at 2 p.m. For many children, the program is their only schooling: Only 40 percent of the youth attend regular school due to their parents' inability to pay the fees. A2S educates them and gives them a meal every day, which for many of the children will be their only meal. They're tutored in all the standard subjects, like math and English, but are also taught about empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Mission:

To provide sustainable programs that generate positive change for Nigerian children and their communities.

Programs:

1. After School Academy – Serves 250 kids daily who get a hot meal and are tutored in English, mathematics, and computer technology. A2S recently opened a computer center and a library at the After School Academy.
2. Scholarships – A2S provides need and merit-based scholarships to Nigerian youth. These scholarships are available annually as long as the child meets the criteria.
3. Summer Programs – Free annual basketball and empowerment camps, and free vacation Bible school. Their teams engage in community projects and outreach. They also distribute athletic, educational, and health supplies.
4. Community Care – Responding to the needs of those in the community. They do holiday giving to provide meals for families in need during Christmas. They have also expanded the feeding program to reach out to over 2500 refugees living in Benin City at an IDP (internally displaced persons) camp who were chased away from their homes by the terrorist group, Boko Haram.
5. Feeding Program – Providing one hot meal each day for all children participating in A2S camps and programs.

To learn more visit a2sfoundation.org.