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Student overcomes isolation, genetic disorder on way to degree

April 12, 2011

Victor Chukwueke has been selected to address his fellow graduates at the Wayne State University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences commencement in May. It's an honor usually reserved solely for the class valedictorian, but this year an exception is being made for Chukwueke.

It seems that everybody who meets Chukwueke walks away inspired. While earning his degree in biochemistry and chemical biology, he has always been on the dean's list, he ran a marathon to raise money for charity, and he volunteers in a research lab working to determine how tumors spread. He also aspires to become a doctor so he can alleviate the pain and suffering of people in developing countries.

Those are all impressive accomplishments, but what catches people's attention is what Chukwueke continues to overcome in pursuit of his goals.

As a boy growing up in Nigeria, Chukwueke developed a benign tumor growing on the top and right sides of his face. His mother took him to hospitals throughout Nigeria seeking medical treatment for [neurofibromatosis](#), but none had the facilities or expertise to treat him.

"I don't know if I'll ever forget the day I went to a large teaching hospital in Nigeria and the doctor touched my face and told me there was nothing they could do," Chukwueke said. "I cried and begged him to do something, I was so tired of the humiliation."

Without surgery, the tumor continued to grow unchecked, leaving him with a severe facial deformity. Chukwueke said as uncomfortable as the tumor was, the teasing and ostracism by other children was more painful.

In 2001, a missionary nun in Nigeria who ran a center for the mentally and physically challenged lined Chukwueke up with a Southfield, Mich., plastic surgeon who agreed to operate on him for free.

At age 15, Chukwueke left his family and his small village in eastern Nigeria and came to Michigan. Ten years and six major surgeries later, he hasn't seen his family since. He lives with nuns in Oak Park, Mich., and his tuition is paid by a man he met through the sisters and who he views as a father figure.

Despite the painful surgeries and separation from his family, Chukwueke views his tumor as a gift.

"I truly feel blessed, I feel like a new person," Chukwueke said. "If it weren't for the tumor I would never have come here and have all these opportunities. I feel so blessed to be here — my professors and classmates, everyone is so nice."

That attitude is why Kenneth Honn, Ph.D., distinguished professor of Pathology in the School of Medicine, nominated Chukwueke as a commencement speaker after getting to know him in his lab.

A line from Dr. Honn's nomination letter reads, "Victor has braved situations and challenges that would humble many and



Victor at age 15 shortly before leaving Nigeria for Michigan.



Kenneth Honn, Ph.D., distinguished professor of Pathology, and Victor working in the lab.



Victor's commencement photo.

that could have instilled self-doubt or insecurity. However, he created goals for his personal and academic life that he has systematically achieved with self-possession beyond his years.”

Stephanie Tucker, Ph.D., a research associate in the Department of Pathology who supervises Chukwueke in the lab, said he embodies the characteristics of the ideal student.

“If something in the lab doesn’t go just right, Victor goes out of his way to follow up on it and assure us that it will get done correctly,” Dr. Tucker said. “It’s a point of personal pride for him.”

Dr. Honn added, “I have never in my life met someone with more of a positive attitude than Victor. He’s a jovial guy with a great sense of humor. He is to be admired.”

James Rigby, Ph.D., Chair of the Department of Chemistry, said his department is proud that Chukwueke will represent it at commencement.

“He is an extremely impressive guy,” Dr. Rigby said. “He has overcome every obstacle to become a first-rate young chemist who will go on to medical school.”

In fact, achieving one’s goals will be the theme of Chukwueke’s commencement remarks. “I will tell everyone that everything is possible if you’re willing to work hard for it,” he said. “No obstacle is too hard to overcome.”

Chukwueke’s Wayne State friends and associates think so much of him, they are trying to raise money to fly his mother and one of his sisters in from Nigeria to attend commencement. They also are working with the U.S. Embassy in Lagos to help with their tourist visas.

When asked about possibly seeing his family for the first time in a decade, Chukwueke choked up, but managed to say, “Oh boy, it would be great, it would be wonderful.”

Donations for the travel expenses can be made at any Fifth Third Bank. Checks should be made payable to: Benefit Account for Victor Chukwueke, and account number 9513344862 should be written in the memo line. If Chukwueke’s family is unable to attend commencement, the funds will be applied toward his continuing education.

