



Alumni Association Scholarship 2021 Recipient Essay

by Lester Efianayi '21

One of my motivating factors for becoming an optometrist, outside of my family history of glaucoma, has been the racial disparity of African-American physicians in healthcare, especially in communities of color. This disparity is also evident in optometry both as a profession and institution. I've come to understand the importance of representation. I have been reminded, on what seems like a weekly basis, just how excited, proud, and comforted many patients are when they see a face they can identify with and relate to.

Optometry has provided me with a platform, and I will continue to use it to reach and inspire young Black men and women to pursue a career in optometry. A familiar face goes a long way. I illustrate this in my blog post, "Bridging the Gap: Diversity in Optometry," as I talk about my life experiences during my presentation as a classroom guest speaker for my former middle school teacher, Elizabeth Reilly. I was ecstatic to be invited back the following year!

In addition to working as a student blogger, as a means to stimulate minority interest in optometry, I also serve on the board and am an inaugurating member of the nation's first optometric Black Student Union (BSU), started here at ICO! BSU serves to support students of African diaspora academically, culturally, and socially in addition to providing leadership and service opportunities to optometry students while encouraging those at the undergraduate level to pursue optometry as a career. My colleagues and I work directly with the "Focus on Your Future" program and are proud to say there are a number of former program participants that have matriculated into ICO and are currently involved with BSU.

Another one of my passions lies in service to humanity projects and organizations. One of my biggest accomplishments to date is the success of the Ebga Village Vision Screening in Edo State, Nigeria in December of 2018. With the help of friends and family, classmates, faculty, as well as strangers, I led and orchestrated a team of local Nigerian optometrists and optometry students to fulfill a lifelong goal of providing eye care to my Grandfather's village and surrounding communities. In total, 242 individuals received vision screenings and education on the importance of eye exams. We also provided access to sun and prescription glasses as needed. Additionally, I served as a board member for the National Optometric Student Association and volunteered as a student clinician for the Eye Health Institute and performed general eye exams, pre-and post-operative surgery consultation in Negril, Jamaica.

As an ICO alumnus, I will continue to use my platform and what makes me unique: to reach others in a way that few people in the program can while inspiring others to positively influence and mentor youth in underrepresented communities towards becoming the next generation of health care providers.