

LEGACY IN ACTION

Tajudeen “Taj” Bakare, PE, M. ASCI CH2M HILL (1999-2003)

Be the Mentor, Advocate, and Coach You Would Want in Your Life to Those in Need Who Cross Your Path

By Deanne Faucheux

If you are on Facebook, Linked-In, Tic-Tok or any other social media platform, you will often be greeted by a posting that remind us to “be kind, because everyone is dealing with something.” Or it is the age-old adage about not-judging anyone “until you have walked a mile in their shoes” that gets your



attention and stirs your conscience. Both sayings truly apply to CH2M HILL Alumni Tajudeen “Taj” Bakare. Meeting him today, one sees a successful engineering advocate and community leader. But how he got there is nothing less than a remarkable testament of courage, determination, and an unwavering commitment to achieving his goal of a good life built on a good education.

From the depths of 1970s Nigeria to his success as the Chief Bridge Engineer for CT Consultants, Inc. in Columbus, Ohio, Taj’s journey has had as many roadblocks, detours, and dead ends as it has had advances and celebrations. Never forgetting from whence he came, today Taj is committed to being the mentor, advocate, and coach he never quite found in his early days while seeking an education and the start of a career. Both as a professional engineer and community

volunteer, Taj lives the legacy of leadership, determination, creativity, and inspiration he learned through his struggles and represents an exceptional example of CH2M HILL’s legacy in action.

The Early Years

Growing up in Lagos, Nigeria as one of twelve children, Taj’s journey through life could have taken many paths. His father, however, set an example of responsibility for his children that laid the foundation of Taj’s ambition. Believing in equality before God, education and faith, Taj was educated in a Baptist elementary school, the Ijebu-ode Ogun State secondary school, and the Ijebu Muslim College. “I studied the Muslim faith in school and Christianity at home.” These experiences, together with his father’s admonition “good grades, good job” led Taj to pursue his studies – but not in Lagos. He lived with his grandmother, gaining a sense of independence while he sought entry into several of Nigeria’s nineteen universities. However, without the right political connections or funds to accompany his applications, Taj’s first attempts to gain entry to college were unsuccessful. He returned to Lagos, worked for his parents in their trading company, but never lost his zeal for education.

An Unexpected Opportunity

To earn the funds he needed for college, Taj worked as a janitor for the Russian Embassy in Lagos. There, he took advantage of the vast library, to educate himself. His eagerness to improve himself was

noticed and he was sent to Moscow on a six-month scholarship to learn the Russian language and culture. If you cannot imagine a young man from Nigeria enjoying a Moscow winter, neither could Taj. He returned home when his scholarship ended.

Enter the American Dream

Six months after his Moscow adventure, President Jimmy Carter came to Lagos and during his speech at the National Stadium issued a call to Nigeria's "best and brightest" to come to America. It was part of a trade agreement whereby local students were recruited and educated and in return, the United States gained access to Nigerian oil. Taj and his brother Jaj both applied, spent two days in testing, and were selected for the program.

Once in America, Taj studied in the District of Columbia, in Denver, Colorado and at the College of Staten Island. And while the opportunity was one in a lifetime, Taj struggled without a mentor, guide, and experienced advisor to help him find his way to the next steps of his education and career. After earning an Associate Degree, Taj went back to Nigeria for eighteen months.

The situation in Nigeria had not changed. Low pay, lack of access to institutions of higher learning, and limited scholarships continued to detour his advancement. He decided the only course of action to achieve his goals was to return to the United States.

Without a scholarship, Taj would be forced to pay tuition and all travel expenses. With six months of saving, he embarked upon the paper trail that would help him gain permission to re-enter the United States. While academia said yes, immigration said no. Finally, through the intervention of USAID, Taj was granted a visa and was able to resume his life in America and to gain his part of the American dream.

Starting Over

In spite of his Associate degree in civil engineering technology, when Taj transferred to City College of New York, the majority of his credits did not transfer and he had to begin his college studies again. Within three years, he reached his goal of a BSCE. Over the course of his time at City College, which would eventually gain him an MSCE, Taj worked odd jobs – he was a tutor, a janitor, and a coach among many. His humility and gratitude for the opportunities he was able to take advantage of kept him willing to do all he could to better himself.

Paying It Forward

Formal education completed, Taj experienced a newfound happiness and sense of wholeness. He was firmly on the path of "good grades, good pay." But he was not done. All his struggles created a profound sense of responsibility and personal passion to help others. Taj made the commitment to help struggling students in any way he could. He passionately believes no student should have to endure so twisted a journey as he did to gain the education they need to succeed in today's world.

Among his activities in the community are his multiple years as a soccer coach, and his service as the STEM Champion at the Unity Community Center where he chaired the Unity Community Festival, a venue to celebrate the community's culture and to offer resources to help on a variety of issues and needs. Recognized by the City Council in 2010, Taj used his engineering expertise to convert an old railroad into a recreational path. He helped make the connection between an abandoned city building

across from the Unity Community Center and secured it to serve as an after school program for the whopping price of \$1 per year. He spearheaded the community's efforts to clean and update the building by gaining Home Depot and Lowe's corporate support and by raising volunteers to do the refurbishment.

Taj's CH2M HILL Tenure

Taj was recruited to CH2M HILL by Steve Wanders, who laid out a path for Taj that he accepted. Steve was responsible for a \$280M Ohio DOT program that included twenty-two bridges and multiple roadway improvements. Taj was just the engineer for the job.

To build the staff needed, Taj began a recruiting program for second year to senior year college students and rotated them through the Dayton office semester by semester. Upon graduation, the firm had the advantage of hiring known resources to expand its DOT capabilities.

After his tenure with CH2M HILL in Dayton, Ohio Taj moved to CT Consultants, first in Delaware where he again worked with the community, this time helping to provide computers and to address food security issues for school children. He returned to Columbus where he remains today, an active ambassador for the engineering industry.

Living the Legacy of Service

Taj's transformed the early challenges of his youth into a lifetime of service to our industry, to students in need, and to the communities he calls home. Gratitude, good humor, and perseverance continue to characterize his thoughts for the future and he continues to preach his father's message of encouragement "good grades, good pay" to those fortunate enough to be a part of his circle of influence.