

NARRATOR: Welcome to Intersections: The RIT Podcast. Not all learning does, or can, happen in a classroom. Last summer, Bolaji Thomas, professor in the College of Health Sciences and Technology, took a group of students to Nigeria to give them a firsthand look at the impact of malaria on global health. Today, Abigail Melake, a biomedical science major, and Janice Fung, a biomedical science and biotechnology major, talk about what they learned from this experience about themselves and their future professions.

ABIGAIL: We went over to Nigeria to do research and get exposed to research methodologies over there. So we were in Lagos for a day or so. And then we actually went over to another state where we got to see the university that Dr. Thomas collaborates with. It's called LAU Tech. They have researchers over there doing malaria research, and so we were able to go into the labs and see some techniques they used. We also got to see the different campuses. We got to see a hospital – a couple hospitals.

JANICE: We got to meet a lot of his collaborators, and there was a lot of discussion and establishing the actual collaboration that was happening.

ABIGAIL: Yeah, this was the first trip they had ever planned to Nigeria. But it's super exciting because you can see how much potential it has. And trying to kind of work out the logistics for the future was interesting because we got to really give them our input and see what would work.

JANICE: What was going through your mind when Dr. Thomas said to come to Nigeria? Why did you want to come?

ABIGAIL: Initially, I was intrigued because I have a lot of Nigerian friends and so I just wanted to go off of that. I've always wanted to go because of them and I've always wanted to go to West Africa. And then when it came to actually what we were doing it was a hands-on trip. It was immunology-based research. Infectious diseases have always been interesting. Dr. Thomas always talks about what goes on in the field – how they actually do research. So, just to see that would've been really awesome. So, I really wanted to go to that. How about you?

JANICE: I just really wanted to go and see what was out there. And also I feel like Dr. Thomas really emphasized the importance of malaria and any infectious disease in general. So, I feel to go to a country where infectious diseases are actually really prominent there, it was, yeah.

ABIGAIL: And to see how they deal with it there and how they carry out their research there. I know a lot of his research kind of starts over there and then comes over here. So I think I was really excited to see how it started over there.

JANICE: Because we got to practice the thin and thick film microscopy and then we also did the urine and stool samples as well.

ABIGAIL: Yeah the sample preps and then we got to see all the organisms. So, I think that was cool. Yeah we were looking at the slides, that was pretty cool. I felt like they were really helpful, like just assisting us.

JANICE: Yeah, so the collaboration is just between LAU Tech and RIT. So, obviously, we don't have patients with malaria in the United States or anywhere close to RIT. That's why Dr. Thomas is really stressing this collaboration, because they have access to these samples, and then we have access to this equipment. It was a really inspiring experience. I think it was really helpful and I think anyone who's trying to be more involved with infectious disease, just to have that exposure in a setting that actually deals with malaria or any other infectious disease, I think that's really important. And exposure to that would be really helpful just so you can see that other side of it, patients actually dealing with it and not just, "Oh, I'm studying this infectious disease." And before we went it was just all in textbooks. So, to see that as an everyday kind of thing that people deal with was actually really eye-opening, I think.

ABIGAIL: I also think this trip is beneficial to actually see what it's like to be in those kinds of hospitals in such rural areas where they don't have a lot. And to actually see malaria patients, like you said, instead of studying it from the textbook or these are the symptoms signs and symptoms. It's just a different story.

JANICE: You get more like a real life exposure to it.

ABIGAIL: Exactly.

JANICE: Yeah.

ABIGAIL: So I grew up in East Africa, so the whole Nigeria trip – seeing the hospitals and seeing everything actually happen in real life – wasn't so surprising because I feel like that's kind of what I've grown up with. So, I guess, when I do study things, I kind of have that in the back of my mind. Whenever they do talk about, "Oh, developing countries have these kinds of infectious diseases," or "This is what they go through," I've kind of always had it in the back of my mind. I guess, more technically, I'm surprised

that the techniques they use there to study. What they do in their labs versus what we do in our labs here. How they work in their hospitals versus how we work in our hospitals here. My mindset kind of shifted. I was more aware of the difference.

JANICE: For me it humanized it a lot more because I was interested in research, I was interested in working in a hospital, so I wasn't sure where I wanted to go. And then, recently, I figured out that I didn't want to go into research just because I'd rather be with people and have that human one-to-one connection. And then when I went on the trip with Dr. Thomas and you guys, I think I realized the importance of having doctors around. It made me want to become a doctor, I'm not saying, "Oh, I'm going to cure malaria," but I think it made me – it stressed the importance of having that education and just being what a doctor really entails. I think it helps guide me into what I want to do, and I always had an interest in immunology, so that kind of tied in with it.

ABIGAIL: For me it was kind of like the opposite. It was more I realized how much I love just being in the lab more. I think I just couldn't deal with seeing patients all the time; I think I get emotionally attached very quickly. It just kind of shifted me more toward all of the lab work, helping from behind the scenes and not in-person, one-to-one. I'm more comfortable helping from the background and doing the molecular research part of it. Oh, I'm looking at the mosquito like, "What's going on inside of this little guy, you know?" So, I think, kind of like the opposite thing happened for me.

JANICE: Coming back from this experience would you tell our peers or anyone else to go on this trip?

ABIGAIL: Yes.

JANICE: Or any other trips?

ABIGAIL: Yeah definitely. I would say just because it's such a different world in Nigeria compared to here, just from the cultural perspective. And also just from the work itself of immunology and infectious diseases and research and the medical field in general – how everything works there. It really puts things into perspective, seeing how the world really works in this medical field. It's not like we're just one country and oh we're just here only. We're all connected, so we should be going out and seeing how everyone is living, what everyone is going through.

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