

A Conversation with Dr. Gladius Lewis

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*Thank you, Dr. Lewis, for providing the response below to the
UofM Chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers.*

MY CURRENT POSITION

I joined the Department of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Memphis in January 1987 and, currently, I am a Professor in the Department. In that role, I teach a wide variety of undergraduate- and graduate-level courses in the Mechanical Design/Solid Mechanics subfield, such as Mechanics of Materials, Manufacturing Processes, Mechanical Behavior of Materials, and Fracture Mechanics. On a few occasions, I have taught other courses outside the subfield, namely, Heat Transfer and Numerical and Statistical Methods. Over the years, I have been involved in a number of research projects in the Biomaterials and Biomechanics fields and acted as research advisor to graduate students for their thesis/dissertation studies in these fields.

OVERCOMING PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I was born and raised in Freetown, Sierra Leone (West Africa). When I was about 8 years old, my mother, who at the time was about 30 years old, was afflicted with a debilitating illness that left her almost completely paralyzed and unable to speak. She remained in that condition until she passed away when she was 63 years old. During all the intervening years, her children (my brother, my sister, and I) did almost everything for her in addition to taking care of the household chores and attending school. That early experience taught me two lessons that have guided me throughout my life. First, challenges are not obstacles, but, are, in fact, opportunities to become innovative and strong. Second, life's achievements should be made in spite of challenges. I joke that the following statement should be the inscription on my headstone: "In spite of, not because of!!!"

A DEFINING EXPERIENCE DURING UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

By way of background, I attended public primary and secondary schools in my native country, Sierra Leone. In my secondary school (equivalent to US high school), I was blessed to have received an excellent education. In all the subjects I took (ranging from English Language and Literature to Geography and French and Mathematics and Physics), instruction was first-class, with the emphasis being on understanding principles first and applications second. (It was decades later that I came to realize that this approach was consistent with the view

espoused by Johann von Goethe, the 18th century German poet and statesman who said, “Knowing is not enough, we must apply.....”.) During my years in high school, I immersed myself in a wide range of activities beyond academics, among which Drama was the favorite. In fact, I was cast in lead roles in an assortment of plays, such as “Charley’s Aunt” (in the film version, Tony Curtis was the “aunt”), “Saint Joan”, and “An Enemy of the People”. During productions, I enjoyed the challenge of learning lines (I had an inordinately large number of them as the Inquisitor in “Saint Joan”) and social interactions with a wide cross-section of the students in the school.

One shortcoming of the high school was that instruction was not provided in what, in those days, were considered “vocational” subjects, such as Technical Drawing, Nutrition, and Mechanical Shop. That shortcoming proved to be a disadvantage during my undergraduate studies in Mechanical Engineering. I did poorly in Engineering Drawing because I did not have any spatial perception of components and structures. I struggled with the class until, finally, I sought help from a tutor who provided patient, one-one-one teaching and coaching. That experience made me appreciate the immeasurable contribution that tutoring makes to student success.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO JOIN AND BECOME ACTIVE IN NSBE

Given my own experience, I encourage (**no, urge**) each student to get tutorial help in any course in which he/she is struggling. Utilize the tutoring service provided by the Herff College of Engineering. In addition, join NSBE and cultivate networking opportunities through such membership. Those opportunities would yield rich dividends, such as finding out about fellow students who could provide extra tutoring assistance, obtaining introduction to hiring managers in local engineering companies, and sharing experiences with Engineering students in other institutions across the country.