

Bola Ibadapo: More than a winning smile

The first thing you notice about self-described “youth enthusiast” Bola Ibadapo is her wide and welcoming smile; even over Zoom, it’s infectious. In person, says University of Oklahoma professor Diana Hartley, “it fills a room.” And while in-person smiles may be hidden behind masks these days, Ibadapo’s can be seen in snack aisles nationwide. Selected by the “Smile with Lay’s” campaign, her grin appears on two different potato chip bags (large cheddar and sour cream and individually sized classic).

“I am happy I was on a good flavor!” says Ibadapo, a 2015 OU alumna.

Now in its third year, the “Smile with Lay’s” campaign donates up to \$1 million to Operation Smile, an international medical charity that funds cleft palate surgeries.

Of course, Ibadapo wasn’t chosen solely for her incandescent smile—the Lay’s campaign recognizes “ordinary” people for extraordinary work in their communities. For Ibadapo, that’s the Too Fly Foundation, a non-profit she co-founded in 2016 dedicated to helping young people of color secure the resources to travel and study abroad.

The child of Nigerian immigrants who met at OU, Ibadapo’s interest in international travel developed early. “My mom has always been big on telling me to explore, explore, explore,” she says.

Before coming to OU, she’d taken educational trips to Nicaragua and China, and as part of a Spanish minor at OU, she had the opportunity to study in Argentina in fall 2014. During that Thanksgiving break, she took a bus trip to Chile with her best friend in the program.

“We traveled back on Thanksgiving Day, on top of a double-decker bus, a window in front of us like a flat-screen TV displaying the landscape,” she says. The feast? Pringles and dates, washed down with tea offered by an Indigenous woman seated next to them. It was an unforgettable experience—she and her friend still text about it every November.

Studying abroad had a big impact on Ibadapo. “What

caught my eye,” she says, “was that I was one of only two Black students in the program.”

In a country where her skin color sometimes drew stares on the street, she learned about the specific racism faced by Afro-Argentines, who weren’t even able to indicate their status on the Argentinian census until 2011. One day, she and a friend wandered into the middle of an Afro-Argentine festival.

To their amusement, they discovered other Black foreign exchange students who had been drawn to the same event. “You could just tell that we were trying to find some type of community.”

Ibadapo’s semester in Argentina highlighted the lack of access that prevents many young people of color from traveling and sparked an idea that would lead to the creation of the Too Fly Foundation.

“As a young, Black woman, having this experience and coming back home,” she says, “there’s a privilege in that. I got to study abroad, I got to have this bigger perspective of the world.”

She also learned that the earlier one can have such experiences, the better. Volunteering with the Loveworks Leadership after-school program in Norman, she spent spring break of her junior year at OU accompanying a bus full of middle schoolers on a trip to Mexico. During her senior year, she went with eighth graders to Washington, D.C.

“Seeing these students who had never left home or had been on a plane before, seeing the impact on them and their maturity grow over a four-day trip—then seeing the questions that formed in their minds just from being outside their city” inspired her to find a way to expand such opportunities for economically disadvantaged students.

In a 2018 TEDx Talk, “Inspiring the Aspiring,” Ibadapo identifies two of her greatest passions: youth and leadership. She tells how events from her own life gave her confidence in herself and her abilities even as a young girl. She once said “yes” to a school counselor who suggested she give a speech to her classmates on perseverance—even though she had to look up the word before she could write her speech. Ibadapo



BY ANNA ANDERSON

OU alumna Bola Ibidapo was chosen for a Lay's potato chip campaign not only for her beautiful smile, but also for her work to provide international learning experiences to disadvantaged youth.

recalls being in so many service clubs and organizations that she spent high school picture days running from one activity photo to another. She was also her high school's first Black homecoming queen.

Despite early dreams about going into the music business, she became a public relations/journalism major with a double non-profit/Spanish minor. Somehow, she found time to serve as programming chair for the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication's chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America and as PR chair for the African Students Association, becoming that organization's African Queen in 2013.

Hartley, who taught Ibidapo in a non-profit management class, found her "engaged and engaging" right from the start. Ibidapo sat in the front row from day one. When Hartley broke her leg skiing and emailed her class asking for help get-

ting into her Dale Hall classroom in a wheelchair, "Bola responded within seconds," she says.

The two of them became close friends while Hartley's leg healed and have kept in touch ever since. Hartley even put aside Sooner pride to write Ibidapo a recommendation for the University of Texas School of Law, where she's currently enrolled and focusing on education law.

"It's been wonderful to see her career flourish," says Hartley. "I was 51 when I had Bola in class, and here she was, this 21-year-old who became one of my heroes—and still is today. She is an absolute inspiration to me and to so many others."

In addition to being a co-founder, Ibidapo serves as program director of the Too Fly Foundation. Since 2016, the group has held creative pop-up fundraisers in 12 cities to raise money for its programs, which provided funds for passports and flight expenses for 160 students.

"A lot of these kids are the first person in their family to leave the state," she says, "much less the country." The foundation also visits Dallas schools to teach travel etiquette through the Too Fly Flight Academy, and, with COVID-19 now restricting movement, is developing "study abroad at home" virtual reality programs.

For now, Ibidapo and her fellow staff members are looking forward to the future, understanding that the marginalized youth they serve may be finding themselves in even greater financial precarity due to the pandemic. Whatever 2021 holds, Ibidapo and the foundation will continue their work, bringing the life-changing power of international travel to students for whom it would otherwise be out of reach.

And that's something to smile about.

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