

American endodontist

From inauspicious beginnings, an immigrant from Africa lands in America with \$300 in his pocket and a dream to become a dentist.

BY PATRICK WAHL, D.M.D., M.B.A. AND LORRAINE HOLLETT

The only people who remember Emmanuel Ngoh from his elementary school are the bullies who picked on him for his stuttering and speech impediment. Born in Cameroon on the West Coast of Africa, Emmanuel was one of 10 children, though only five survived. Those five survivors shared two beds. Whatever money the parents could muster, they spent on education.

When his father died, Emmanuel had to drop out of the local university. The family business was peasant farming, but Emmanuel heard stories of a "Promised Land." That's what they call the United States of America in Cameroon.

Emmanuel managed to convince his sister to mortgage the family home and, with the money, pay Emmanuel's way to the U.S. He arrived in Atlanta in 1986, age 23, with \$300 in his pocket. He found a job as a dishwasher, working most nights until 2 a.m. before waiting for a bus home.

Somehow, he managed to save enough money to start junior college the next year. He worked nights and weekends. He could not afford the distraction of friends; he allowed nothing to pull him away from his goal of becoming a dentist.

He stopped telling the people he met about his goal. They would only laugh and tell him it wasn't possible. Meanwhile, he studied hard and always took more than the full course load. He even took some courses by examination without attending class.

His chemistry professor took a special liking to him and advised trying dental hygiene. The thinking was

that a hygiene degree would help in getting into dental school and would be a source of income while there.

In 1988, Emmanuel began hygiene school at the Medical College of Georgia. He still worked in the restaurant, now running the kitchen. An inexhaustible supply of No-Doze™ kept him awake for the constant drives between school in Augusta and work in Atlanta.

Sure enough, he was accepted into dental school, which brought more criticism of his accent and speech impediment. He worked with a speech pathologist until



ILLUSTRATION: THOMAS O. HANWARD

he could no longer pay her already reduced fee. He was now working nights and weekends as a hygienist.

Emmanuel not only paid for dental school, but at the same time sent money home to his family in Cameroon. He sacrificed better grades for more money by taking more work as a hygienist. He had no intention of going to graduate school anyway; surely a GPA of 3.0 would be good enough.

In an effort to save money, he finished his requirements a semester early. When new rules didn't permit early graduation, he stuck around to complete the highest number of cases in his class in all the different disciplines, and won three different clinical awards.

As a general dentist, Emmanuel worked in several offices.

He paid careful attention and learned more from the things these offices were not doing than from what they were doing right. And the more endodontics he did, the better he liked it. Finally, he limited his practice to endodontics.

He knew that endodontic residencies were very competitive and his dental school grades were less than ideal. He asked program directors what he could do to improve his chances, and got to work doing research and volunteering in the dental school.

Emmanuel Ngoh was the first African American accepted to the endodontic residency at the Medical College of Georgia. Student loans weren't enough; he maxed-out his credit cards, too.

Emmanuel was advised to stay in academia. After all, everyone knows that general dentists will not refer to a person of color with an accent from Cameroon. But Emmanuel refused to listen to any of this "turkey talk," as he calls it, about his color and his accent.

Emmanuel got married in 1993, but immigration bureaucracy kept him apart from his wife for four long and lonely years. His singular hobby during that time was self-improvement — Stephen Covey, Dale Carnegie, Toastmasters and the rest.

To the dismay of his accountant and his friends, Emmanuel turned down an offer to join a prestigious endodontic practice in town because, he says, "I would not have the chance to manifest myself to the fullest."

Instead he set out to open his own practice.

"Starting a dental practice can be a daunting experi-

ence," Emmanuel says, but he was heartened by the abundance of information available on the subject. "I did not have to reinvent the wheel. I did my homework and sought out mentors who were very willing to help me.

"Remember, if you see a turtle on a fence post, it had to get help," he says.

In fact, adds Emmanuel, the most difficult part of the whole process — writing the bank plan to get financing — has turned out to be a great deal of help.

"It turns out to have been a roadmap," he says. "I revisit the plan now and then."

With your business goals written down, he continues, now you have to hold yourself accountable to what you said you would do.

Emmanuel now has a practice that is paid for in a building he owns. He and his team live their mission daily at the Augusta Endodontic Center: "We are unconditionally committed to excellence and make every patient visit fun and uplifting in a Christ-centered environment."

Ronald Reagan once said, "You can go to live in France, but you can't become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Italy, but you can't become a German or an Italian. But anyone from any corner of the world can come to live in the United States and become an American."

Emmanuel Ngoh wasn't born with any special talent, save an extra pound of desire and an added ounce of courage.

He rose up, created his own opportunities and stands as an example of the American dream — not only to his family, his relatives, his friends and his colleagues, but to the bullies from his old neighborhood.

"I think they're surprised when they find out who I am now," observes Emmanuel.

"They can't believe where I am in life. I think we're all guilty of prejudging people or ruling people out, and I hope that what I've been able to accomplish serves as a reminder of this principle to them." □

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—Dr. Ngoh

Dr. Wahl and Ms. Hollett of Office Magic work with success-driven doctors like Ngoh. For free practice-building tips, visit their Web site, officemagic.com, or call 800-750-8779. Ngoh, who has written a book, "Principles of Success: Find Keys to a Successful and Fulfilling Life," may be reached at 877-411-3636.