When Olabode Folarin first came to the United States nearly three decades ago, he settled in California. A poor Nigerian immigrant, he had no options in housing and relied on the charity of a Christian organization to provide him with a place to live. He was placed in the heart of Watts. His house, he says, was a few short blocks from the city’s crime-ridden projects. He remembers living there only a short while before witnessing four different shootings. After the last shooting left someone dead, he promised God that if he were given children, not one would meet the same fate.

Anne W. Watts, associate vice president for Academic Affairs says Morehouse “raises the bar and scales it.” She oversees the College’s Rhodes nomination process, which trained Folarin for the interviews and reviewed his application. Watts says he honed his interviewing skills with a hand-picked group of administrators. The training prepared him well. Folarin remained cool under pressure during the
strenuous day-long process in Texas.

How Folarin became a Rhodes Scholar it is a lesson in strategy. His is a life built on it and the plan of parents with a vow to keep. He and his father recount tales of Folarin’s childhood. Homework was to be done as soon as Folarin arrived home. No video games. No television except for the Nightly News with Tom Brokaw. His parents’ demand for academic focus kept him slightly disgruntled, but astute. He also learned priceless lessons that would carry him through his college years. “It taught me how to manage time,” he admits. “I read voraciously because we weren’t allowed to do anything else. It definitely contributed to my ability to speak and write.”

But what Folarin reveals “altered the course of his life” was not learned in his parents’ house or by poring over books. It would come in Cape Town, South Africa, from a young girl.

It was two years ago when he was in the country working for a nongovernmental group while on summer break. Each day, he rode the minibus into Cape Town. Amid the bustle of college students, a small child stood out. Her face was dirty. Her clothes were mere rags. And her brown hair reached just below her thin shoulders. For days she followed Folarin through the city’s streets asking for money.

At first he ignored her. But one day, he turned and asked her name. She gave him her name and her story.

Her name was Thandeka.
She had AIDS.
She had been raped.
At 13, it was up to her to provide for her siblings any way she could.

They shared walks almost every day after that— but she never again asked him for money. “That affected me a great deal. The first-world, third-world divide that existed in South Africa was egregious,” he says solemnly. “One of my good friends

had family in South Africa and they lived in this palatial mansion just outside of Cape Town, and then five minutes from that you’d see people in the townships who just didn’t have anything.”

But Folarin’s desire to help developing nations hits even closer to home. “I’m really passionate about helping people in third-world countries because both of my parents are from Nigeria and a lot of my cousins definitely don’t have the things that I have here,” he said. “I need to make a difference, I’m not sure in what capacity yet…. Public service is where my heart lies.

“Being in South Africa brought everything into focus because of the struggles I had…It hurt me to see that people were making a living with next to nothing. They began to think that this was almost as it should be since they had lived that way for so long.”

Dr. George Kieh Jr., political science department head and one of Folarin’s mentors, says that he has seen Folarin’s focus shift from academic matters to a shared interest in scholarship and activism—a rarity for thinkers like Folarin. He says he also is sure that it is in the area of making an impact on the developing world that the Rhodes scholar will make his mark.

“Intellectuals analyze society’s problems and tend to be less involved in trying to resolve them. The discovery of an activist is the discovery of a rare person,” Kieh says. “If Tope went into the academy, that’s essentially the person he would be: a scholar-activist. He would make an impact on people’s lives no matter what he does.”
Folarin has grown accustomed to bending against the trend. It’s the reason he chose Morehouse and turned down offers from Stanford and Dartmouth universities.

At his majority white high school in Utah, he was oftentimes the only African American high achiever. The battle to prove himself was one Folarin fought all his life. He decided he would not spend his college years fighting, too.

Morehouse was the right choice, he says. He had dreamed of obtaining the Rhodes since high school. Folarin is a tutor and a member of the debate team. He’s confident that he couldn’t have found such purpose at any other institution.

“If it’s incredibly empowering to see that I’m not the only one because I’ve always been the only black on the honor roll. I got sick of that and that’s not the case here,” he says. “When I go off into the world, and perhaps I may have to encounter that again, I can draw on the experiences I’ve had here.”

Folarin will travel to England this fall to begin a two- to three-year study in politics with a concentration in comparative government. It will be the first steps he will take to making a difference. Seven black students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities have been awarded the Rhodes—a fact not lost on Folarin.

“I really want to have a hand in changing that,” he says. “I think Morehouse is one battleground where we can begin to win that fight.”

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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Folarin with His Excellency F.T. LT. Jerry John Rawlings, former president of the Republic of Ghana, during a recent visit to London.

RHODES SCHOLAR NIMA WARFIELD ’94
Received degrees from Oxford and the University of London. Worked for The Wall Street Journal as a copy editor for three years. After September 11, drastically changed his lifestyle and left journalism. Now owns the Alkalight Group International, a health and wellness company, and has a four-year-old daughter Kiara Elon Warfield.

RHODES SCHOLAR CHRISTOPHER ELDERS ’02
Finishing doctorate in modern history at Oxford University. Plans to go to law school and pursue a career in U.S. and Asian foreign policy.

ABOUT THE RHODES
Rhodes Scholarships provide two or three years of study at the University of Oxford in England. The scholarship is the oldest international study award available to American scholars. The value of the scholarship varies depending on the academic field, the degree (bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral), and the Oxford college chosen. The Rhodes Trust pays all college and university fees, provides a stipend to cover necessary expenses while in residence in Oxford, as well as during vacations—and transportation to and from England. The total award averages approximately $28,000 per year.