

# Lagos Leaders

Welcome! On these pages we try to bring you the view points of prominent members of Lagos on a range of topical issues. In this feature, **Mrs Bilikiss Adebisi**, LPS parent and CEO of Wecyclers talks to us about how her MBA project led to an inspiring social programme in Lagos.



## **Thanks for speaking with us. Can you please tell us who you are and what you do?**

My name is Bilikiss Adebisi and I am the CEO of Wecyclers. Wecyclers is a social enterprise working to help people capture value from their waste. We provide convenient collection of recyclable material from households using our fleet of low-cost cargo bicycles. Households get redeemable points in return. We aggregate collected waste and sell to recyclers.

## **Were you born in Nigeria? If yes, when did you leave and why?**

I was born in Lagos Nigeria, into a family of 5. I attended Corona Ikoyi, for my primary School, and then Supreme Education Foundation for Secondary School. After this, I enrolled to study Law at Unilag, but only ended up staying for 1 year before leaving for the US. I left because the year at Unilag was very difficult, the conditions were terrible. There were constant clashes and fights among certain students, it really was not great. I had to leave as my parents and I were scared for my safety.

## **You continued your education in the US?**

Yes. I did my BS in Computer Science from Fisk University, my MS in Computer Science from Vanderbilt University and I got my MBA from MIT, Sloan School of Management. The reason I chose to study Computer Science was because at the time, everything was getting computerised, so I thought I'd jump into that field. I actually enjoyed programming, as I am analytical, love to solve problems, and like mathematics.

## **What came after your studies?**

After my Masters Degree I went to work for IBM, for 5 years, and by the end of it, I was all "computered" out. Initially, I was lucky to be working under a very intelligent boss who gave me a lot of responsibilities and also gave me big projects to work on, but the issue was the lack of career progression. In order to get promoted and move up the ladder, I would have had to work at IBM for a very long time. However, the benefits were good, we could work from home.

## **So what did your day to day role at IBM involve?**

I worked on a few projects developing some interesting products for our customers. Sometimes these products (software) had to be deployed internally at IBM and I was responsible for this. You can imagine as we had 400,000 employees globally, that was a lot of users to look after. For example if a server went down, I would be on call to provide support. That was a bit frustrating because sometimes you could find yourself at 2am on a Saturday morning trying to fix a broken server, and the pressure was immense as everyone was on your case.

Downtime to our critical servers could sometimes get escalated up the management chain, so you can imagine how one would just have to respond when ever calls came in. These things happened from time to time so it was quite stressful. In the end I figured it wasn't what I wanted to do. I didn't want to continue working in an office. I wanted to be with people, I wanted to give back. So I quit the job and I went to MIT for my MBA to rediscover my purpose. I'm of the opinion that studying for an MBA is usually a good idea because it gives you "breathing space". It gives you time to look for a job, think about your life, provides an amazing network and much more.

**MIT is a highly regarded school but arguably, usually preferred for science and tech, what inspired your decision to go there?**

It was amazing. The people there are very careful about the MBA programme and who they select to come on. I made a lot of lifetime friends at MIT and I'm really glad I went there. I also applied to Harvard and didn't get in but glad in hindsight that I ended up going to MIT. Whilst there, I was able to interact with counterparts at Harvard, and other prestigious schools and I felt like I was happy it worked out there. At Harvard the way they program you is different. It's more about having discussions about hypothetical situations and how you would respond, whereas at MIT it's about "How do you get stuff done?", all about learning by doing. The culture was not about talking but about doing. If you had an idea, then it was all about implementing it. The motto at MIT is 'Minds and Hands'. Interestingly, there's a popular joke that Harvard graduates are the Managing Directors of Companies, and they hire MIT graduates to come and do the work and crunch numbers.

It was an amazing 2 years. The program consists of 4 semesters, and Wecyclers was born in the second year of my MBA. For our project, we had to choose specific sectors for our group, and I chose "waste". In January, as there are no classes, I took that time to go to Nigeria to see family and ended up doing a small project on waste management. This was during the fuel subsidy crisis which was difficult because of the strikes and all that, making planning difficult. The idea was, we asked people to bring their waste in for the opportunity to enter a raffle draw to win various items. The response was amazing, and people were excited. We also interviewed some kids, asking what they thought about "waste" in general. They were generally unhappy about the state of waste management within their communities which sometimes caused disputes with neighbours. After this, I returned to MIT to complete the MBA, and whilst there, we entered some competitions with the business idea and got some support. I then moved back to Nigeria after I graduated to set up the business, and things have been progressing since then.

**When did you move back to Nigeria?**

I moved back in August of 2012. My husband had always lived in Nigeria, which is one of the reasons for that. I also moved back to be closer to my parents, family and friends, and to set up Wecyclers.

**How did you find the initial experience once you hit the ground?**

It was hard; I've had moments. I lived at my parents for about 6 months and they live on the Mainland and Lagos Prep is on the Island. So we used to commute every day. Every week I spent 13 hours in traffic, which was quite a nightmare.