

# Cowleys Cultivated Nigerian Talent at Baptist School

EthicsDaily.com has just named Bill and Audrey Cowley, retired missionaries to Nigeria, as its [2016 Baptists of the Year](#).

Bill and Audrey Cowley not only saved lives during a tribal genocide in Nigeria in 1966, but they also founded the Baptist High School (BHS) in Jos, Nigeria, in 1961.

BHS emerged as a pre-eminent educational institution during their tenure. It remains so to this day.

The Cowleys are featured in our latest documentary, "[The Disturbances](#)," about the role missionaries played saving lives in that tribal genocide. Another notable facet of their story, of course, is their role as incubators of Nigerian talent.

They were missionaries, yes - and educators.

Producing documentaries for EthicsDaily.com for more than a decade has revealed a pattern. Regardless of topic - racism, taxes, immigration, poverty, prisons, to name a few - the experts we survey eventually start talking about ...

Education.

Formal education, continuing education, valuing education. Listen to those "in the know" talk long enough about a problem or a challenge, and the conversation will eventually circle around to education.

Circling around is here circling back, and 1961 Nigeria was a country shaking off British colonialism. Nigeria achieved its independence from the crown in 1960, and Africa's most populous country was grooming its own leaders.

Missionaries like the Cowleys came alongside to aid in this considerable task. And these two Southern Baptists - outfitted with faith, a sense of adventure and their own educations - were up to that task.

They founded BHS on the northern outskirts of Jos, securing land, overseeing construction of the campus, sifting through more than a thousand applications that first year, looking for the 30 boys who would comprise the pioneer class.

The Cowleys found them - and influenced life trajectories.

Segun Lawoyin became a doctor, specializing in internal medicine.

Ejem Ahanotu earned a doctorate in microbiology and worked at the Centers for Disease Control in the areas of toxins and bioterrorism.

Timothy Olagbemi became chancellor of Bowen University, Africa's largest Baptist institution of higher education.

Jonathan Ikerionwu took a doctorate as well. He teaches in Nigeria.

These members of the BHS inaugural class are a good sample of the school's graduates.

Few, if any, Christian or government high schools anywhere in Africa have produced more MDs and PhDs, as well as government officials, business leaders, clergy, educators, military officers.

"As a high school, we were taught properly," says Olagbemi, adding that he tried to replicate his educational experience at BHS while leading Bowen University.

Olagbemi remembers the school's "watchword," as he calls it. It was Psalm 133:1: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity."

"We worked as one when we were at the high school. We were just one together,"

he says. "When you see any graduate of Baptist High School Jos, they are quite different."

In fact, many BHS boys were different from each other - tribally. And that was by the Cowleys' design.

"It was a good foundation that Rev. Dr. Cowley started with," says Olagbemi. "And really he went around to all Baptist churches in the North to look for students, who were interviewed. He took Igbos, he took Hausa, he took Yoruba."

The Cowleys chose boys from different tribes purposefully, believing that part of their task was not only education, but also promotion of Nigerian unity.

"All 30 of us lived together as if we were brothers," says Ikerionwu. "We did things in unison. We did things in unity. We did things just as if we were brothers."

"They developed such a rapport, Christian way of living, to the extent that we all took on that particular way of living," says Ikerionwu. "It was excellent. We gathered ourselves as our brother's keeper. We did things together."

Ikerionwu remembers meeting the Cowleys on his first day at Baptist High School:

"On that first day, I said, 'This must be a very peculiar family for them to have left the United States and come to live with us in this society. They must be very unique.' And throughout my stay in Baptist High School, I found this family to be extraordinarily unique. Fantastic. Loving. Religious. To the core. They brought us up in the Christian way of doing things. That is one thing I would never forget in life."

That "peculiar family" was composed not only of Bill and Audrey, but also their young daughters, Carol and Karen.

Ikerionwu remembers the Cowleys saying they had two daughters and 30 sons.

**<https://ethicsdaily.com/cowleys-cultivated-nigerian-talent-at-baptist-school-cms-23821/> December 30, 2016 Cliff Vaughn**

“They took us, each and every one of us, as their son, which is very, very peculiar, which is very, very unique,” says Ikerionwu.

“Look, I have never seen that close tie between a principal of a school and the students,” he says. “I have never experienced that, even up to now.”

✘ [Cliff Vaughn](#) is media producer for *EthicsDaily.com* and co-producer/director of *“The Disturbances.”*