

Setting the Tone

Ndidi Oteh '00 and the Art of Personal Agency

In Jim Llufrio's Upper School Latin class, **Ndidi Oteh '00** was inspired in a way that has helped to shape her career. "Mr. Llufrio declared, 'You're in this class to learn not only how to act 'in here', but how to act 'out there,'" Oteh recalls. "I remember that so vividly. He taught us that you get to set the tone. You get to choose to be a leader and what it looks like. That phrase powerfully resonated, and I say this to my teams all the time," she said. "Set the energy. Be passionate about what you're doing. It's contagious. When you walk into every meeting and every situation with that energy, people can't help but smile even when they don't want to."

Llufrio's message became a cornerstone of Oteh's philosophy—an early catalyst for her lifelong belief in taking responsibility for her growth and being a perpetual, creative problem-solver. Twenty-five years after graduating from MICDS, she now serves as Senior Managing Director of Accenture Song for the Americas, leading the largest tech-powered creative agency in the world. On September 1, she will become the Global CEO for Accenture Song.

Forging Her Own Path

Oteh started Latin in seventh grade at her parents' request—part of a dream they had of her becoming a doctor. "I did not study pre-med at any point in my college career. But after six years of Latin, it did help me greatly with my ACT and SAT," she laughs. When her parents took her and her siblings to visit schools, they left the decision to them. "The decision of where to go for seventh grade, I think, was the first real decision I was given," Oteh reflects. "After seventh grade, I never imagined going anywhere else. MICDS provided a well-rounded education, which was something my parents were already practicing. My dad is from Nigeria, so my siblings and I followed



the typical Nigerian storyline: play an instrument, play a sport, do homework, and always study more than you think you need. Attending a school that embodied those values was a relief. I loved being a part of an institution that allowed for multidisciplinary, creative learning and a space where you could build your own path."

Just as starting middle school on Warson Road marked a turning point, so did her journey to college. Though she committed to Davidson College in her senior year, her parents had decidedly different plans.

"My father is very traditional, and he felt strongly that I as a woman, shouldn't be too far away from home," she said. "What I didn't know was that he felt so strongly that he had decided that I would go to Washington University in St. Louis. He chose my dorm and my first semester classes, all without telling me. I didn't find out until July, and I was so angry at my parents and swore I'd never talk to them again. Moving out was very dramatic. But things changed once I settled in. I had an amazing time at WashU. I met great people there, some of whom went to MICDS, and others I'm still close with. It was also a moment and a place that gave me a new voice. I don't want to say my parents were right," she said with a smile. "However, it worked out well!"



Nndi and her mother, Gwen Oteh



Nndi and her sister, Dr. Chioma



Nndi with her parents Gwen and Ibe

As a political science major, Oteh immersed herself in history, politics, literature, and analysis. She worked for Teach for America as an undergrad, initially envisioning a career there, but a financial crossroads led her to a full-time role in the buying office of a well-known national retailer. Her plan was to return to Teach for America and eventually attend law school. Yet, her trajectory shifted rapidly. "In the first year, I got promoted, which was considered fast at the time. Then, in the second year, a buyer in the office quit, and I had to go on my first solo trip to New York. I was alone and had the confidence of naïveté. I kept getting promoted and was one of 10 people selected to move to New York. My Senior VP advised, 'You really have to think about this. New York is expensive and a hard city to live in. Do you really think you can grow your salary 10 times in 10 years? Because that's what you will need to live there.' And I thought, I have nothing to lose. I'm gonna bet on myself, I'm responsible for my own career, I'm gonna see what happens. I felt so blessed, and my faith had guided me so far, so I moved to New York, and it worked out better than I could have imagined."

The Leap of Faith

Ten years in the retail fashion world took Oteh around the globe—attending fashion shows, collaborating with designers, approving products, mastering textiles, and leading major operations. "I loved it. I got to travel all over the world, doing things that I never could imagine when I was 17. We went on long sourcing trips where we would be in India for three weeks, then Tokyo for a day, Thailand for a day, Shenzhen for two weeks, and then stop over in Paris for shopping. On one trip in Shenzhen, I was negotiating pricing at a factory, and at the time, I was 27 or 28, the youngest person at my level. I was managing a \$400 million business. I had a big team who reported to me, and suddenly I was like, 'I don't want to do this anymore,'" she says.

Although she didn't yet know what was next, Oteh stayed for six more months. With just three weeks left, a recruiter reached out, connecting her with two consulting firms, one of them being Accenture. "Through the interview process, I connected with a family friend who was a retired partner from Accenture, and she said, 'This is a really hard job. You may never make Partner.' I have never been one to fear what might not happen. I did know that I have always wanted to be in the room to help people and companies solve the toughest challenges, and I felt strongly that consulting would give me the skills to do that."

Taking a substantial leap, she started over, leaving her senior role, taking multiple steps back, and accepting a significant pay cut. "I was betting on myself with a lot of faith, and I knew I had to call my mom," Oteh said. "My mom said, 'Whatever you decide to do will be the right answer.' I'm like, that's horrible coaching! You decide which college I'm going to, and now you guys want to be hands-off?"

Consulting life was demanding from the start. "I flew all over the world, catching whatever flights were available, spending time in windowless client offices with different teams, building PowerPoint slides. It was a very different experience for me."

>> continued on page 6

Nndi with two of her brothers, Ifeanyi '01 and Jeremiah '09





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NDIDI OTEH

>> continued from page 5

The transition wasn’t seamless. “In the first 60 days, I think they were second-guessing their decision to bring me on board! I could tell they were wondering if I could figure it out. I have always been very determined and responsible, and I knew I would, and within a few months, I had! I went from Consultant to the highest-level partner you can be at Accenture—Senior Managing Director in less than 10 years.”

The Power of Perpetual Learning

Accenture Song is where creative innovation and cutting-edge tech converge, encompassing marketing, generative AI, commerce, design, digital products, and more. “I’ve been able to work with some of the most amazing clients,” said Oteh. “It’s been so good, and I never could have planned this path. I had to take steps back to move forward, which was scary. But once you do it, you know you can do it again.”

“One of our Chief Operating Officers at Accenture asked if I went to MICDS because he did, too. He was on one of the accounts I led, and someone said, ‘The way you two speak is so similar. You two put problems together in the same way, asking the same three questions.’ He and I were like, well, we did have the same English teacher, Mr. Grimley. So, along the way, MICDS has shown up in the most surprising places,” she said.

After 14 years with Accenture—a rarity in today’s professional world—Oteh still feels energized. “Mr. Ribbing, my senior year English teacher, had a poster in his room that said, ‘You are

responsible for your own education,’ and I have carried that with me throughout my career. I tell my teams that you’re responsible for your own career. You get to decide if you’re going to learn and grow.”

This philosophy, she explains, is integral to her role. “Consulting is about constantly learning,” she said. “When I speak with a company or brand, they often expect me to share knowledge across technologies, industries, and capabilities, sharing more than what they may have experienced or read. If you are not a person who loves to learn all the time, consulting is not the right place for you. I love that there is never a finish line in consulting. I have to constantly be willing to reinvent myself and focus on trying to be smarter than I was yesterday, so that I can help my clients see around the corner.”

It’s no surprise that her high school class noted in their senior yearbook that she was most likely to become a guidance counselor. Today, she leads and mentors teams and brands with the same spirit of laser-focused direction and radical empathy.

“Most of the time, I’m talking to someone who’s already brilliant at what they do, so it’s not always about proving that you know more,” she said. “It’s actually about sharing the patterns, the experiences, and how to win faster based on other industries and situations. I have to say, ‘This is what’s happening over here and here, and we have done this type of project over 100 times.’ It also means that you never have a slow day.”

Enduring Wisdom for a Changing World

MICDS' Commencement in 2000 found its graduates in the wake of the Y2K global concern, and Oteh's path was largely undefined. What kept her tethered throughout the last 25 years were several core tenets from her time at MICDS that, in her opinion, stand as timeless guidance for today's graduates:

Think critically. "Make sure you're thinking. Be curious about what's in front of you. What does 'next' look like for you?"

Act compassionately. "We all make mistakes. I make mistakes all the time. Make sure that you use compassion with others, but also for yourself, or you will never move forward. Trust that you will learn, that you are capable, and what defines you today is not necessarily what will define you tomorrow."

Expect change. "Hold the perspective that the only constant is change. Kara Lawson, the Duke basketball coach, coined the phrase 'handle hard better.' High school and college teach you how to handle hard things better. Sometimes I tackle really difficult things and they don't feel hard because I built the muscles for it."

Connect widely. "I see a connection everywhere; there's something similar about all of us, even people you disagree with or who you are very different from. Some of the best teams are full of people who have different experiences and backgrounds who may not agree, but have a clear goal in sight, and when it comes to getting the work done, we are in lockstep."

Know your mission. "What is your mode of operation? How do you want to work for you? What helps center you? Learning that information early is critical."

Becoming More Without Letting Go

Oteh stays grounded in her values while embracing growth. She said, "I don't believe you should ever feel bound by what you were 10 years ago. I hope that you're smarter. I hope you've experienced more than you did a year ago, six months ago, three months ago. I know I am smarter today than I was two weeks ago, and that's intentional. Earlier this year, I was speaking at a conference about brand values. What's really critical for a brand is to be clear on who they are. Knowing who you are also requires you to know the world around you and know how you have to evolve, because the world will always shift. But it shouldn't change who you are; it's about finding your balance."

"Will I evolve and change and have different career paths? I hope I do," she said. "I hope what I do next is something I haven't done before and is bigger and bolder than what I'm doing right now. But the core components of who I am, I know will remain all while I'm evolving."

Ndidi's Rules for Life— A Personal Brand Manifesto

- 1 Do your work and do it well.
- 2 Always help someone else, even if it's not reciprocal.
- 3 Let the negative things go.
- 4 Find the good. Sometimes there's only 1% good. Focus on that.
- 5 Operate with courage and compassion.