



## First Steps

*Manny Ohonme's journey to success started with the gift of shoes*



Emmanuel "Manny" Ohonme (right), founder and president of Samaritan's Feet International tells youth at the [Memphis Athletic Ministries Grizzlies Center](#) how a pair of shoes given to him as a child in Nigeria changes his life.

BY JAMES DOWD

As a 9-year-old in Lagos, Nigeria, Emmanuel "Manny" Ohonme started to see the world differently after a stranger gave him a pair of shoes.

The sneakers -- the first the youngster had ever owned -- were offered by a missionary from Wisconsin and led to Ohonme's lifelong love affair with America.

In the three decades since, Ohonme's journey has taken him from college and graduate school in the United States to success as an entrepreneur and founder of a global nonprofit organization. In less than a decade, his Charlotte, N.C.-based Samaritan's Feet has given away nearly 3 million pairs of shoes to underprivileged children around the world and in America. The organization also has offices in Lagos; Indianapolis; San Bernardino, Calif.; Capetown, South Africa; and Sao Paulo, Brazil.

"I think many people in this country don't realize how fortunate they are, but I can tell you that this country is wonderful, and I feel blessed to be here," said Ohonme, who made his third visit to Memphis this week. "I am proof that no matter where you're born or whatever circumstances you encounter, there is always hope. A difficult past does not have to prevent a successful future."

Ohonme was keynote speaker Friday at the Lipscomb & Pitts Breakfast Club, which brought more than 300 local business leaders to the Memphis Botanic Garden. On Thursday he spoke to more than 100 youths at the **Memphis Athletic Ministries Grizzlies Center**.

Ohonme emphasized the value of collaboration, encouraging Memphis business leaders to work with area schools and faith-based organizations to strengthen the community.

"Make your time count, ask yourself why you're here and work toward achieving a positive purpose," Ohonme said. "You may not be able to change the world, but you may become the world to a child."

Joseph DeVivo of Smith & Nephew said events such as Friday's breakfast provide a much-needed booster shot.

"Memphis is misunderstood and underappreciated, so it's up to those of us here who love it and care about it to change the city's image," DeVivo said. "The good news is that we can do it by creating a better community to live in and helping each other succeed."

Jeremy Park, director of the L&P Breakfast Club, agreed.

"The more that business leaders become involved in our community, the stronger we all become," Park said. "Creating a better place to live and raise our families should be a priority for us all."

Established five years ago, the Lipscomb & Pitts Breakfast Club sponsors more than 150 events each year, including roundtable lunch-and-learn forums, tutoring opportunities and community improvement projects.

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