

Thunderbird grad prepares to strengthen diplomacy across African continent

Barrett, The Honors College student Isaac Sheku Bayoh graduating with a Bachelor of Global Management

By Mary Hess, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

Brookfields, a spirited neighborhood in the heart of Freetown, Sierra Leone, shaped Thunderbird School of Global Management student Isaac Sheku Bayoh long before he ever stepped onto campus.

Raised in a community where hope and hardship sat side-by-side, he absorbed early the resilience, tenderness and quiet brilliance of his nation's soul. When his mother passed, exactly one week before his birthday, it became a profound turning point that reshaped his understanding of purpose and responsibility.

"It taught me early that service must outlive us," he says. "It reminded me that the legacy we leave in others is the only legacy that truly endures."

His time at Thunderbird unfolded alongside a demanding diplomatic career at the United Nations, often moving between multilateral negotiations in New York and academic rigor in Arizona. He recalls writing papers between Security Council briefings, studying theory at dawn, and advocating for the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda by afternoon.

"Thunderbird taught me that global impact requires more than vision, it requires stamina. More than intellect, it requires humility," he said.

There was a moment, he recalled, sitting in a quiet corner of the U.N. headquarters after a tense negotiation session. He opened a Thunderbird reading on leadership and realized the two worlds, diplomacy and academia, were shaping one another.

Bayoh also earned a place on the Dean's List while completing his honors curriculum at Barrett, The Honors College. His academic focus, paired with his diplomatic work, reflects the values of excellence, service and leadership that define both Thunderbird and Barrett.

His commitment to YPS, rooted in memories of friends in Freetown navigating unemployment, political uncertainty and untapped potential, became a guiding thread through his studies. The agenda became personal.

Bayoh's honors thesis, "Youth Norm Entrepreneurs and Global Governance: Sierra Leone's YPS Diplomacy in the U.N. Security Council 2024–2025," is a rigorous exploration of youth-led change, African civic movements and norm diffusion in multilateral institutions. Guided by professors Roy Nelson and Olufemi Babarinde, Bayoh conducted academic research while directly applying its findings in U.N. negotiations, a synthesis few students achieve. Faculty describe him as unusually disciplined, thoughtful and deeply aware of the stakes of global leadership.

After he graduates this December with a Bachelor of Global Management, Bayoh will continue into Thunderbird's Master of Leadership and Management program while advancing the YPS agenda across Africa's governance ecosystem; particularly ECOWAS, the African Union, and the community structures of Sierra Leone that first formed him.

"I walk forward with gratitude, but also with a mandate; one shaped by Freetown, sharpened at Thunderbird and tested at the United Nations. Wherever I go next, I carry Sierra Leone with me. And I carry the belief that young people, when empowered, don't just change their own lives, they change the world," he said.

Question: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at Thunderbird?

Answer: Professor [Roy Nelson](#) taught me that leadership is, at its core, a moral act long before it becomes a strategic one. He challenged me to lead with clarity, humility and discipline, to understand that intellect without integrity is merely performance, and that true leadership reveals itself most honestly in the moments when one's convictions are tested.

Associate Professor [Olufemi Babarinde](#), with his quiet brilliance, expanded my understanding of Africa's evolving place in global governance. He invited me to see Africa not as a continent seeking relevance, but as one reclaiming agency, voice and historical memory.

Together, they shaped my academic journey and, ultimately, the very architecture of my worldview.

Q: What advice would you give to a student just starting a program at Thunderbird?

A: Come to Thunderbird with your whole self. This school will stretch you. It will demand the version of you that you have not yet met. And that is the gift. You will doubt yourself. You will be tired. You will have nights when your faith wavers, when the workload blurs into fatigue, when your dreams feel too heavy.

You will find pieces of yourself in classrooms, in conversations, in the quiet between assignments, pieces you didn't know were missing. Come ready to grow. And when strength fails, return to the reason you came. Because purpose is what will carry you through.

Q: What will you take with you from your experience at Barrett?

A: As graduation draws near, I have been reflecting on how Barrett did more than educate us. It reshaped my understanding of purpose in a world that needs principled leadership. This community taught me that scholarship must be rooted in compassion, courage and service. That belief guides my work at the United Nations. ... In every negotiation, speech and policy effort, I have carried Barrett's spirit, the understanding that knowledge should always find expression in compassion and meaningful impact.

Q: What motivates or inspires you?

A: I am inspired by the audacity of young Africans who insist on dreaming in difficult places, who build, create, organize and imagine even when the world tells them their dreams are too large for their circumstances. What moves me most is the quiet, stubborn miracle that a young person, from Brookfields, from Freetown, from any corner of the world overlooked or underestimated, can rise, lead and transform the very systems that once excluded them. I am motivated by legacy, not the kind etched in marble or inscribed on buildings, but the legacy written gently and indelibly in people, the belief that one life, lived with intention, can shift communities and, sometimes, even nations.

Q: For what in your life do you feel most grateful?

A: I am grateful first to God, whose grace has carried me farther than talent ever could. His hand lifted me from places I never imagined escaping and opened doors I never imagined entering.

I am grateful for my mother, whose life and passing carved a canyon in my world and yet planted a purpose that has never stopped growing. Her memory steadies me. Her love still shapes the man I am becoming.

I am grateful for family, for mentors, and for the community that believed in me long before titles or credentials tried to validate me. They held my dreams when all I had were fragments.

I am grateful for the journey itself, the bruises and the blessings, the detours and disappointments, the victories, losses, broken places and restored ones, because all of it wove together the tapestry of who I am today.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



His Excellency, Julius Maada, president of the Republic of Sierra Leone, presents Isaac Sheku Bayoh with an award for outstanding service.

Text image(s)



Isaac Sheku Bayoh in the Office at the Permanent Mission of Sierra Leone to the U.N.



Isaac Sheku Bayoh.



Isaac Sheku Bayoh as a featured speaker at the Oxford Africa conference, a forum for leaders and students to discuss Africa's future and catalyze positive change.



Isaac Sheku Bayoh at the U.N. Security Council.



Isaac Sheku Bayoh with the Sierra Leone U.N. Security Council delegation.