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OBAMA INITIATIVE: LIBERIAN YOUTH LEADER STUDIES AT WAGNER COLLEGE

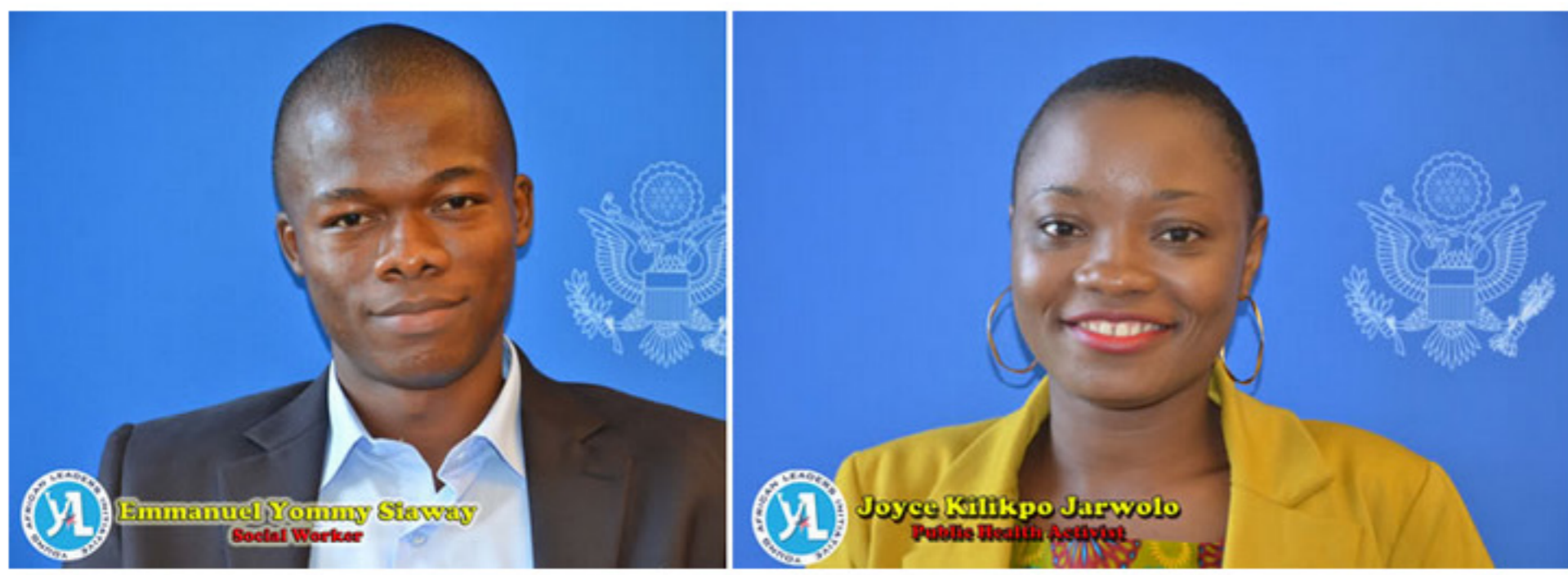
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Staten Island, N.Y., USA — For the last 4 weeks, Emmanuel Y. Siway Jr. of Sanniquellie has been part of a group of 25 young African leaders from 20 sub-Saharan countries studying community and nonprofit organizations at Wagner College, in the New York City borough of Staten Island. The Wagner College cohort is part of U.S. President Barack Obama’s Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, which has placed 500 men and women in programs at 20 colleges and universities across America this summer.

Emmanuel is a Project Officer for SEARCH — the Special Emergency Activity to Restore Children’s Hope. SEARCH was created in 1999 by a group of inexperienced high school graduates in war-ravaged Sanniquellie, in Nimba County, to protect the rights of children affected by armed conflict in Liberia. SEARCH’s activities have been expanded to include women, youth and refugee issues. The group provides disaster relief to individuals and communities within the Republic of Liberia.

Each Mandela Washington Fellowship institution focuses on one of three areas public management, business and entrepreneurship, or civic leadership. Wagner College, the only small college selected for the Washington Fellowship, was chosen by the U.S. State Department for the civic leadership curriculum because of its groundbreaking Port Richmond Partnership, which links Wagner professors, classes and students with 20 different community agencies, schools and churches in a nearby Staten Island community.

Wagner College President Richard Guarasci laid out the basic theory underlying the Port Richmond Partnership and everything else his school does to engage with the community in a constructive, collaborative way: “We believe that true leadership has less to do with power, rank or authority and more to do with the ability to bring together diverse groups of people in a common purpose and a shared vision of a better world.”

“It is amazing how the college’s design of the civic leadership program taps into relevant domains of development, social change and community service strategies,” Emmanuel said. “I have learned that an asset-based, community-driven, human-centered approach in civic work is needed for sustained impact.” Wagner’s Mandela Washington Fellows, as the 25 young leaders are called, spend parts of their day engaged in classroom lectures and discussions. They also visit many different kinds of community organizations in the field to see first-hand how they operate.

This week, the Fellows visited Lifestyles for the Disabled, a Staten Island facility that helps equip developmentally disabled citizens with work and life skills. The Lifestyles campus includes a café, commercial greenhouses, a laundry, building maintenance shops, a woodworking shop and a radio station, all run by the program’s participants with help from staff and community volunteers.

“Both limitations and opportunities are tremendous factors in our diverse societies,” Emmanuel said, reflecting on his experience at Lifestyles. “It takes optimism combined with functional approaches to make the world a little better and more accommodating in the face of actual or perceived barriers in life.

“Lifestyle’s goals of service and social inclusion apply directly to my agency’s work, and I believe our country could benefit by developing the kind of functional and enabling environments for disabled people that I saw there.” Emmanuel had several ideas about how he could apply his Mandela Washington Fellowship experience at Wagner College to his work in Liberia when he returns home.

“The new ideas I’ve learned about networking, innovation and civic engagement will help my organization’s projects last longer and serve more people,” Emmanuel said. “I will also initiate community activities through advocacy and mentorship, with the goal of youth empowerment and peace building and linking those in need with the opportunities they seek.”

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