

In America, a reminder of Africa's greatness

By RUKAYYA NASIR SANI

From the YALI website: "The Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, begun in 2014, is the flagship program of President Obama's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) that empowers young people through academic coursework, leadership training, and networking. The Fellowship provides 500 outstanding young leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa with the opportunity to hone their skills at a U.S. higher education institution with support for professional development after they return home. The Fellows, aged 25 to 35, have established records of accomplishment in promoting innovation and positive change in their organizations, institutions, communities, and countries. Fellows have the opportunity to participate in one of three tracks: Civic Leadership, Public management and Business and Entrepreneurship."

This is an attempt to share my experience as a Civic Leadership Fellow at Wagner College, and hopefully encourage youth across the country to avail themselves of this unique opportunity.

I was sent the link for the Fellowship application by friends last October, but I had to convince myself this wasn't some internet scam before setting out time to fill out the online application form. Applicants had to write a 50-word introduction to President Barack Obama as well as essays on our work, achievements, strengths and even weaknesses we sought to improve. The interviews took place in several locations all over the country — and continent — early this year.

So out of 50,000 applicants from 49 countries — 7,000 from Nigeria — 500 young men and women from all over the continent, 41 of whom were Nigerian, were selected to embark on what would be a life-changing experience.

Hello, Wagner College!

And so it began, a highly intensive 6 weeks of academics consisting of seminars, lectures, team building activities, and site visits. Whoever thought they were coming for a 6-week vacation must have had the shock of their lives. Sessions started early in the morning and lasted till late evening, sometimes extending into the night. Our curriculum started with basics and concepts of civic leadership and a crash course in economics and finance, including the cost of corruption. We had a week on healthcare where we were introduced to the American health system and health budget. Being a doctor, this was the week I enjoyed the most. There was a week on education, and another on the environment. We learnt about executive writing, speaking, and even listening; grant writing; forming and sustaining partnerships and collaborations; amongst others.

We visited many organisations and institutions as part of our academic institute. We got a guided tour of the U.N. headquarters and a briefing on the Sustainable Development Goals. We went to Toms River, a town in New Jersey where chemical waste dumping had caused an epidemic of childhood cancers, and met with Linda Gillick, who led a local legal fight with the said chemical companies that resulted in a settlement for the affected families. We went to the mayor's office in Philadelphia and got a tour of their Innovation Lab.

I had the honour of studying together with 24 Fellows from 20 different countries who had diverse professional backgrounds: health workers, musicians, actors, town planners, teachers, lecturers, journalists, to name a few. Most Fellows had some form of community engagement apart from formal jobs. Mine was Project Pink Blue, which does community outreach on awareness creation and free screening services for breast and cervical cancer; and the Global Shapers Community, which carries out various community projects, including a recent clothes donation campaign for internally displaced persons. With a job as a research clinician and a desire to pursue a career in non-communicable diseases, especially cardiovascular diseases, my fellow Fellows proved instrumental in broadening my perspective on “the possible.” Before leaving Wagner College, all 25 Fellows — with help from the English Department — co-authored a collection of Japanese-style poems called *haiku* about our work and passions.

New York

Much to my joy, I got assigned to Wagner College, a picturesque school on Staten Island in the state of New York. It was a pleasure to explore New York City: from Central Park to Times Square, the Empire State Building, New York Public Library and the high-end shops on Fifth Avenue, to Coney Island, the Barclay Centre and the gentrified neighbourhoods of Brooklyn, and Harlem.

One of our biggest treats was a group trip to the new World Trade Centre. The tallest skyscraper in New York, with elevators called “skypods” that deliver customers from ground to the 102nd floor in 46 seconds — yes, 46 seconds — it houses the One World Observatory on its 100th to 102nd floors. Here, one gets a breathtaking view of New York City.

Another unforgettable experience was getting to watch the Broadway show, “Wicked,” which is a twist on the popular “Wizard of Oz” story. A New York experience wouldn’t be complete without bumping into a celebrity or two. Thus, while enjoying a walking tour of Brooklyn, we bumped into Jeffrey Wright, who starred in “Casino Royale” and “Source Code,” to mention just a few.

What I loved the most about New York, however, is its diversity. Whatever you wore, however you looked, it would be a herculean task to attract stares in New York. Thus I would often go out in Ankara garb and a veil without thinking twice about it. One of the secrets to New York’s growth is this diversity.

My American summer Ramadan

We arrived the U.S. in the first week of Ramadan and stayed on till well after Eid. Our schools had, however, made arrangements for Muslim Fellows observing Ramadan. One shocker for me though was the New York weather: It was hot, humid and sunny, with temperatures as high as 39°C and a sun that didn’t set till 8:30 p.m. Attending the annual Ramadan Dinner at Maimonides Medical Centre was a major highlight.

Having had to observe nearly the whole of Ramadan while on this programme, I found myself having to answer a lot of questions about Islam. Why did we fast during Ramadan? Why did we cover our hair? Why did Muslim women avoid shaking hands with men? Why did some Muslims do one thing and others the opposite? And so on. I did my best answer these questions with what little knowledge I had, and explain the concepts of modesty, charity, humility, and compassion, not just to humans, but also to animals and plants, as they relate to Islam. But I guess one of my key messages was that there was Islam, and then there was what Muslims do, and the two were not always the same.

‘Are you sure you are Nigerian?’

This is a question a lot of us Nigerian Fellows were asked with surprising — and annoying — frequency. The general impression about Nigerians, held especially by other African nationalities, is that we are “loud and lawless.” This is, of course, an unfair over-generalisation, but Nigerian bad news seems to travel fast and far in Africa. I was terribly embarrassed when a fellow doctor from Liberia asked me if it was true that the previous administration had once sacked all resident doctors, and that there were restrictions on residency in Nigeria. Both of these were true, and the said embargo — which was only recently lifted — has prevented a lot of us young doctors in Nigeria from pursuing a specialization.

Nigerian Fellows have done our country proud. President Barack Obama was introduced by our very own Grace Jerry during the Town Hall Meeting in D.C. Nigerian Fellows presented Ignite talks and moderated sessions during the summit. I had the honour of moderating a session on “The Public Health of Non-communicable Diseases.” By the end of the programme, the general impression about Nigerians had at least started to change. Hopefully the next time a well-mannered Nigerian represents the country internationally, they will not be asked where they are “really from.”

The Presidential Summit in Washington, D.C.

After 6 weeks of intensive academic training on a vast array of subjects, all 500 Fellows from 20 schools converged on Washington, D.C. to attend the Presidential Summit at the historic Omni Shoreham Hotel. The summit kicked off on Sunday night with a reception, followed by the much awaited Town Hall Meeting with none other than President Barack Obama the next morning. Sitting two rows from the stage where he addressed us, he appeared as charming and was as quick-witted as on TV. Seminars, break-out sessions, presentations and Ignite talks followed in quick succession over the next two days.

One of the highlights of the summit was a “crisis simulation” where each Fellow — playing the role of an official from either one of the U.S. Government departments — got a feel of decision-making in a rapidly changing environment armed with limited information. Our recommendations were then presented to White House staff. The summit rounded up with a partnership expo, regional meetings, a closing ceremony, presentation of certificates signed by President Barack Obama, and a talent show.

Disability is not inability

The Fellowship has so far been many things to me: informative, inspiring, enlightening, but most of all, humbling. I met so many great individuals, but I’ll play particular tribute to persons living with disabilities. I studied alongside two amazing deaf Kenyan ladies at Wagner College, Natha and Georgine, on whose account some of us started to learn sign language. We had one deaf Nigerian Fellow as well. But it wasn’t only deaf persons; there were blind Fellows, Fellows who were physically challenged and confined to wheel chairs. Africa is one of the most difficult places to live in if you have a disability; despite their everyday challenges, these individuals were determined to make life better, not just for themselves, but for their communities as well. I was awestruck.

How ephemeral life is

Nigerian Fellows had the honour of being invited to the Nigerian embassy in Washington, D.C. for a meet and greet with embassy staff, hosted by Ambassador Adebawale

Adefuye. When he jokingly insisted that we finish up all the Jollof rice and moin-moin because wastage was not tolerated on Nigerian soil, little did we know it was the first and last time most of us were going to see him. Nigerian Fellows would like to extend sincere condolences to the Adefuye family, the Nigerian embassy and the nation as a whole for this loss.

Africa, My Africa

After this whirlwind experience, I have also come to love my country, continent and its people even more: the wholesomeness of our food, our sense of community, our family values, and our resilience. America is not perfect either. There are homeless people in America, there are potholes on the roads, it is cheaper to buy a bottle of soda than it is to buy a bottle of water. Access to healthcare is greatly hindered by private insurance companies that can dictate what a patient gets from a hospital visit. But they constantly strive for progress.

The heroes of my YALI story are my fellow Fellows, all 499 of them, especially my 40 other Fellows from Nigeria, as well as my 24 other Fellows from Wagner College; the pride and future of Africa, for the amazing things they are doing, for changing the single story narrative — of poverty, diseases and safaris — about Africa, and for the promise they hold. I have always believed that there is immense strength in diversity, and this experience has served to strengthen this belief. I now have friends from Madagascar, Cape Verde and the Kingdom of Swaziland. This wasn't a trip you came back from with a fatter bank account, although our transportation, accommodation and feeding were all paid for. But the experience was, indeed, priceless.

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