

August 15, 2016

Obama's greatest legacy empowers next generation of African leaders

By SAMUEL GETACHEW

As the Obama presidency is near its end and historians are set to reflect on the legacy of America's first black president, I can't help but look favourably on the impact he has had on the continent of Africa.

His legacy is not one founded on the principles of charity, but that of an ever-expanding citizenry that has empowered the next generation of African leadership by way of a White House fellowship program.

[The Mandela Washington fellowship](#), named after the iconic South African leader upon his death in 2014, was started to help empower the next generation of African leadership by president Obama.

Upon its foundation, the president reflected on how the next generation of African leadership will "leave behind for the next generation — and the generation after that — an Africa that is strong and vibrant and prosperous, and is ascendant on the world stage." Amen to that.

Every year, [the program](#) brings its participants to the United States and gives them the tools they need to succeed by way of exclusive leadership training and rich networking opportunities with accomplished leaders from many sectors. Open to those who have looked at the challenges of Africa from youthful and unique perspectives, it aims to change the perception of a continent the *Economist* magazine once dubbed "[the dark continent](#)."

In 2015, [Marta Tsehay Sewasew](#), a now-28-year-old Ethiopian social activist and social entrepreneur was among the 500 participants.

[She was an attractive candidate](#) with a hefty resume to her credit. Involved in a slew of developmental programs on girls' education, women and youth economic empowerment, youth leadership, empowerment of young people with disabilities, and adolescent youth reproductive health — she was a poster child of exemplary citizenship.

For six weeks, she lived in Wagner College, in New York and gained valuable skills. For her, "The six-week leadership program enabled me to enhance my knowledge on civic leadership and civic engagements." After the conclusion of the training, she was invited to attend a three-day presidential summit hosted by President Obama involving leaders from many sectors.

At the summit, she co-moderated a panel discussion on girls' education in Africa.

Currently serving as the Ethiopian National Project Coordinator with the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO), she volunteers as a board member for Eastern Africa Regional Advisory Board (RAB) for Young African Leader Initiative Program, which plays an advisory role in providing inputs for USAID, IREX (the International Research & Exchange Board) and the U.S. Department of State.

I asked her what the legacy of the fellowship program has been for her. "As a young professional, the fellowship enhanced my knowledge, experience and created a networking opportunity with young, like-minded Africans engaged in developmental activities," she replied, adding that "the fellowship created an opportunity to learn from the best practices of other Africa

countries and U.S. in the area of education, health, environmental protection and civic engagement that can be implemented in Africa.”

[The formidable leader](#) has initiated an intervention entitled “Mobile for Students Reproductive Health (M4RH).” The intervention provides monthly informative, confidential and youth-friendly text messages on reproductive health for Addis Ababa university students.

The Ph.D. aspirant student in international relations wants to expand her initiative nationally, while looking at ways to create income generation and economic empowerment for young people in her country.

Last year at the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, [president Obama spoke](#) of an ever-changing continent, where many envisioned a continent where trade, not aid, is the new approach, partnership instead of patrons is the new way and where liberty to choose one’s destiny instead of being dependent should be the future direction of their society.

That is why the Mandela Washington fellowship program is the roadmap to that vision and it may be one of president Obama’s greatest legacies from an international perspective.

*Samuel Getachew is a resident of Toronto and is a regular contributor to **TZTA**, **Generation Next** and **Leaders & Legacies** (among others). He is the recipient of the City of Toronto’s William P. Hubbard Award for Equity and Human Rights and was chosen by the Toronto Star as 'Person to Watch' in 2014.*