

YALI: Where Dreams Became Reality

Eurídice Monteiro

The Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is a signature program of the Obama Administration. The inaugural year was in 2014 with 500 participants, in 2015 the same number of young people participated. In 2016, in his last year as president of the United States, Barack Obama decided to open the opportunity for 1,000 young people from sub-Saharan Africa to participate in the YALI program, including eight from Cape Verde.

During the six-week program (June 17 to July 30, 2016) we were placed in academic and leadership institutes at U.S. college or universities in one of four tracks: Business and Entrepreneurship, Civic Leadership, Public Management, or Energy. In my case, I was selected for the Public Management track at Bridgewater State University (BSU) in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, the oldest school for teachers in the U.S., completing this year its 175th year of operation.

For me, beyond the opportunity to participate in leadership training, the YALI program was also an extremely important opportunity to learn more about the history of the Cape Verdean community in Massachusetts. Moreover, it was an extraordinary networking and learning experience, not just at an academic level with teachers and professionals in the United States, but it was also an excellent occasion to share with other young people from sub-Saharan Africa.

Cabo Verde was one of 49 countries that sent a combined 1,000 young leaders to the U.S. this summer. One of my biggest takeaways from the fellowship was learning from other fellows. Africa is not a country! We are young people from different African countries. Strengthening cultural understanding in Africa is a powerful tool that can unite us as Mandela Fellows. I've always been impressed by the Africa's cultural diversity. We are all very different, yet belonging to this same continent. In this vast diversity, Cabo Verde is no exception. It's unique since it is smallest country among those 49 that sent their young leaders to the US this summer. However, despite its geographic and demographic size, I believe that we made a difference in this program.

The Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is not only an intensive training program. It is a program with an extraordinary and profound

impact on our lives in personal and professional terms. With the acquired knowledge, the leadership skills and the networks among our peers and also with U.S. government agencies, organizations, and professionals, this program will have a lasting influence on all of us and in our organizations, institutions, communities, and countries.

Two Hours with Barack Obama

After the six-week program in our academic and leadership institutes, all 1,000 Fellows from sub-Saharan Africa went to Washington, D.C., to attend the Presidential Summit, from August 1-3, 2016.

If when I am very old my grandchildren ask me what was the most hilarious moment in my life when I was young, certainly I will not hesitate to answer that they were the two hours I spent with President Barack Obama ahead of me.

For me, it was a great pleasure meeting Obama and sitting in front of him for two unforgettable hours. Getting to look Obama's eyes, shake his hand and talk to him as if he were our "uncle" (his expression), it was just magical. Those two hours were like walking in the clouds. Obama is a leader who inspires; he is a star. And when he speaks, everyone listens. For example, all of us were really impressed when he described how we don't need to focus on what we could be but on what we can do for our continent. In addition, another great part of the conversation was when he shared with us his own history and political trajectory.

One other powerful moment was when the Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield said for us: "dream big!" Her voice echoed in our hearts.

The Brookings Institution

After six weeks at a university and then the summit with President Obama, 100 of the 1,000 fellows were selected to remain in the US for six more weeks for an internship in American institutions. Each of us was placed in an institution in accordance with our professional interests.

In my case, I was selected to participate in a Professional Development Experience (PDE) as part of my Fellowship. I was lucky to be placed at The Brookings Institution, one of the oldest and most recognized think tanks based in Washington, D.C. The

