

Affecting Change on a Continental Level

“There I was, near the Ed Roberts Campus at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, where the independent living movement all began and I was telling myself it could happen in my country too.”

Reflecting on her Mandela Washington Fellowship, the flagship program of President Obama’s Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Hilda Bih Muluh says it starts with public policy.

“If we can change the national policy, then it will change a lot for people with disabilities both now and even those in the future; not just one person or one part of the country, but the nation together.”

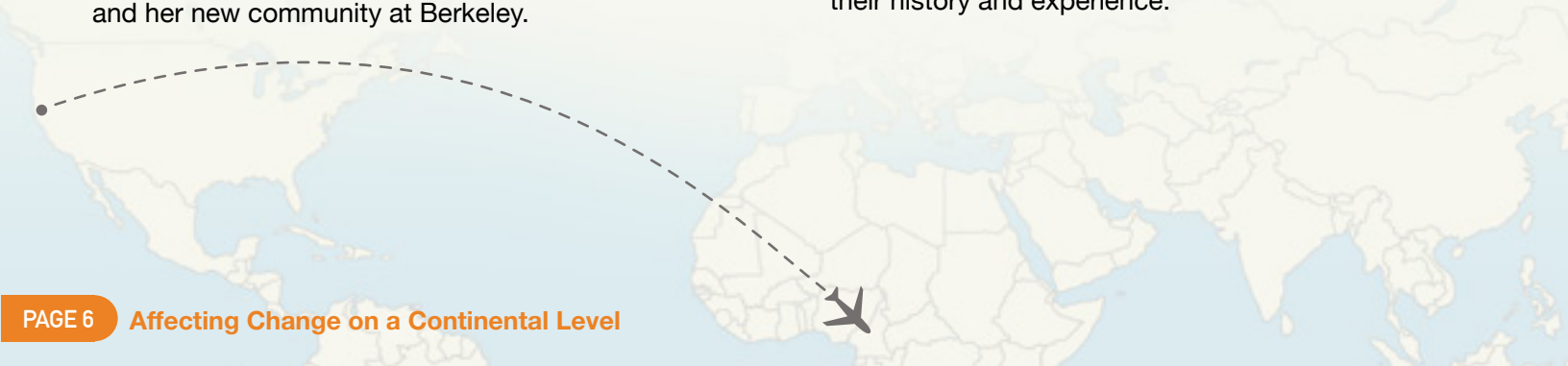
After acceptance in to the Mandela Washington Fellowship, sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, Hilda was very nervous and had apprehensions. She was used to being around her family and had never left her country of Cameroon before. As a woman with muscular dystrophy, Hilda was also concerned because she knew she would need a full-time personal assistant. Luckily the program was able to provide assistance with the visa process, airfare, and living expenses to bring her sister as her personal assistant. This provided a lot more opportunity for Hilda to fully participate into her program and her new community at Berkeley.

During Hilda’s program at UC Berkeley’s Goldman School of Public Policy, she learned how to network more effectively with other people and organizations.

“I am more intentional and more strategic with my advocacy. As opposed to only focusing on case by case situations, I am now also looking at the bigger picture to affect greater change.”

Hilda not only gained knowledge from the Goldman School, but also by connecting with her Mandela Washington peers. She met others working on similar projects and found out what was going on in other African countries. “Together, we all came to learn from the American experience and then how to return home and cause change in our various countries.”

It was the first time Hilda experienced such independence and the first time she used a power wheelchair. She was able to get around independently, enter buildings on her own, and the first time she could get on a train without being carried by others. All of these first experiences had an impact on Hilda when she returned home. Looking around when she reached home she started thinking, “How did the U.S. achieve more accessibility? It’s not perfect in the United States, but we can learn from their history and experience.”





She has already reached out to other Mandela Washington fellows in Cameroon and the YALI initiative provided her a platform to talk about disability issues. “People listen more now that I’ve been a part of this program and they want to know what it is like in the United States, how we can make Cameroon better.”

Hilda is working on using the media to change perceptions of disability in the rural communities. Since radio and television are most common communication in Cameroon, Hilda has created both a radio and TV show to reach a larger community.

The Mandela Washington Fellowship “gives you a voice and it puts you into this powerful network, which should encourage more young African leaders with disabilities to apply.”

“As the program continues to grow, imagine the impact of having the voices of thousands of young leaders who are passionate about bringing change to Africa.”



Young African Leaders, It's Your Turn to Apply!

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