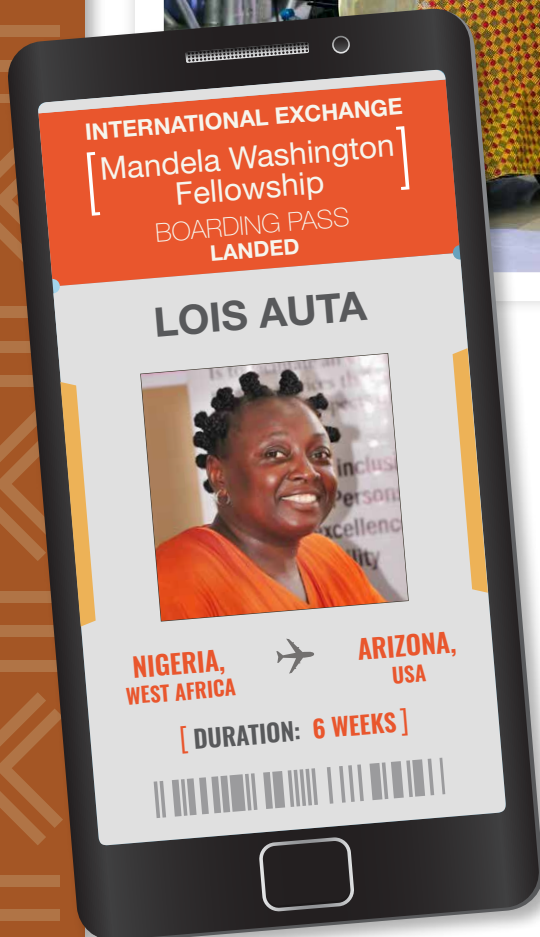
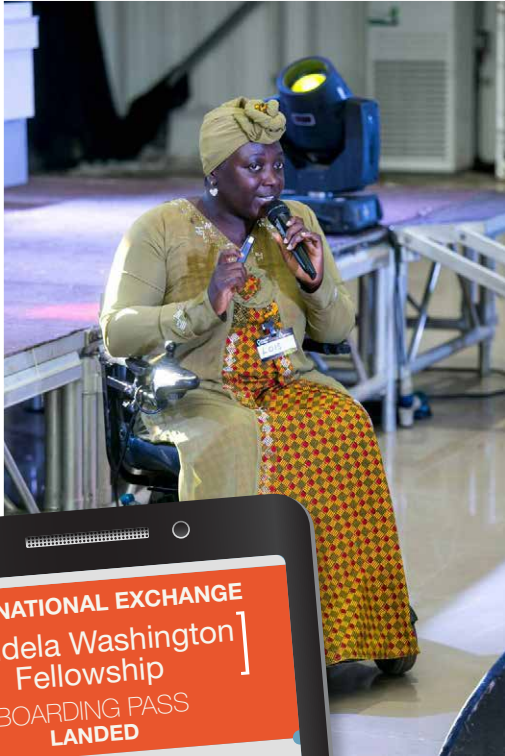


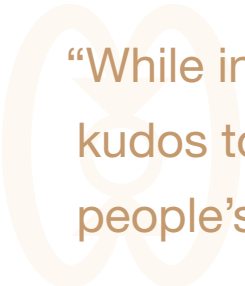
# Lois Auta — A Young African Leader, Transformed

By Sophia Bennett



Lois Auta was already making a difference in the lives of Nigerians with disabilities even before she was selected in 2014 to participate in the inaugural Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, the flagship program of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). But since returning home from her fellowship, she's taken her advocacy to a whole new level.

Lois is the founder and executive director of the Cedar Seed Foundation, a youth-led membership organization that advocates for people with disabilities. It focuses on improving access to education and employment, providing entrepreneurship opportunities, advancing human rights, and giving people a voice in policy-making decisions.



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A friend who was familiar with Lois’s work encouraged her to apply for the Mandela Washington Fellowship, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. She was one of the first 500 young leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa invited to travel to the United States for the Fellowship in 2014.

Hosted by Arizona State University and studying civic leadership, Lois received training in leadership, advocacy and other skills that were very applicable to her work in Nigeria. “I learned about volunteerism. I learned about budgeting and how to develop projects. I learned about using social media tools to spread the word about what we’re doing.”

Lois had polio as a child and has since used a wheelchair for mobility. She was one of 16 YALI Mandela Washington Fellows with disabilities in her cohort of 500, and she had no trouble accessing all the Fellowship’s activities. That stood in stark contrast to what she experiences at home.

“While in the United States, I shed tears for my country. I said, ‘Look at all the facilities [in the United States] that are provided for persons with disabilities.’ I was put up in accessible hostels and hotels. They made sure I always sat in the front row so I could see everything that was happening during events. I said kudos to the United States government for recognizing disabled people’s rights. I wish Nigeria could do the same.”

During her six weeks in Arizona, Lois met with others advocating for the rights of people with disabilities and learned about their programs. She also got to partake in some memorable recreational activities. One weekend, the Fellowship staff took Lois’s group hiking near Kartchner Caverns State Park, in Flagstaff.

“I thought I wouldn’t be able to participate fully. I know very well from back in Nigeria that mountains can never be accessible to a wheelchair user. But

I followed my coaches and colleagues everywhere they went.”

For Lois, one of the highlights of the Fellowship was the closing Presidential Summit in Washington D.C. “When President Obama was passing by, he gave me a handshake. When Michelle Obama came, she gave me a hug. Their speeches inspired me, particularly the First Lady’s. The experience has transformed my life.”

When Lois returned to Nigeria, word of her experience with the Mandela Washington Fellowship spread quickly. More Fellows with disabilities applied in subsequent years, allowing the program to include more than 140 Fellows with disabilities over the next three years. Upon her return, Lois’s visibility grew — she appeared on magazine covers, national television shows, and local newspapers and was invited to participate in important policy discussions. She was the only person with a disability invited to participate in drafting a policy document for Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in advance of International Youth Day 2015. She was also invited to be part of the group that presented it to him during a televised ceremony.

“About thirty of us were on stage, and I was the lucky one to get a handshake from President Buhari.”

Lois’s Cedar Seed Foundation is also getting stronger thanks to her participation in the Mandela Washington Fellowship. Her organization received free office space from the pastor of New Estate Baptist Church in Lagos who was touched by her story, and she’s learned about possible funding opportunities. She was named to the most recent class of Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum.

With the knowledge and higher profile she gained from the program, Lois will be leading the change to advance the rights of Nigerians with disabilities.