

Ally Baharoon

Living, Speaking, and Dreaming on the Mandela Washington Fellowship

A participant with a stutter from Tanzania experienced what it was like to be heard on the Mandela Washington Fellowship of the Young African Leaders Initiative.



Ally (back row, third from right) joins the graduates of the Getting Ready for Opportunities in Work (GROW) program at the Bobby Dodd Institute main campus.

Ally Baharoon participated in the Mandela Washington Fellowship in 2023, hosted by the University of Delaware. Ally, who has a stutter, hoped that by learning more about organizational capacity-building and by forming contacts with like-minded professionals, the Young African Leaders Initiative would enhance his disability rights work in support of Tanzanian stutterers.

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Finding a Vocation Through Disability

Ally first began to stutter when he was five years old, shortly after his father passed away. Soon after, the way people interacted with him changed. Listeners would no longer wait for him to finish his sentences. They would interrupt and even make fun of him. As a result, he preferred to keep to himself for much of his childhood. He focused on reading and writing as a way to express himself and took a great interest in English literature. He discovered that by making his speech more rhythmic and by carefully selecting his words, he could express himself better.

His attitude toward his disability changed upon graduating high school. He appreciated the ways that it enhanced his writing and interpersonal relationships. He started thinking about it as a speech pattern rather than an impediment and began to speak more openly about his stutter. He explained to people that it simply takes him longer to say things. Soon, he felt a huge burden lifted from his shoulders. His interactions with others felt more authentic.

Ally reflects that sometimes when someone has a different speech pattern, others assume that that person has nothing to say, or that if they did say something, it wouldn't be worthwhile.

He became steadfast in his belief that individuals with different speech patterns deserve to be heard. This led to him creating the CHAMMUTA Tanzania Special Speech Patterns Association, the objective of which is

Tanzania

to create a society that welcomes children and adults who stutter. They carry out workshops with parents and teachers on speech differences and on ways to hold more inclusive and supportive spaces. His organization works with media outlets to challenge and avoid negative depictions of people with stutters. They also introduce young adults to stories of individuals with speech differences. "In CHAMMUTA, we thrive in embracing our differences because it is our stutter that makes us stand out", reflects Ally. "It is by confronting these challenges that we highlight our primal responsibility to educate

ourselves and build a world where what we say is more important than how we say it."

The Mandela Washington Fellowship was an impactful experience for Ally. He and his group visited the Delaware state legislature, where they met with representatives and the governor. One particular highlight was when they were hosted by the Delaware Africa Coalition at an annual dinner. Ally reflected that "It was incredible seeing so many people of African descent in one place, and they made us feel so welcome with the home cultural foods." The coalition also encouraged them

to keep in touch and explore opportunities for collaboration.

Observing a Different Way

While on the Fellowship, he noticed that people took the time to listen to what he had to say. They also recognized his abilities as an orator. They nominated him to represent his cohort as a speaker giving an Ignite Talk at the Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit, during which he shared about the events that had led him to found his organization.

A key part of his fellowship was his internship with the Bobby Dodd Institute, an Atlanta, Georgia-based nonprofit organization creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As part of his internship, Ally assisted in the creation of quality improvement plans for BDI consumers. He also got to be a part of the farewell party for the Getting Ready for Opportunities in Work (GROW) Program, which prepares high school students with disabilities for the world of work through site visits of local employers and activities to develop their job skills.

"Working at Bobby Dodd Institute allowed me ample time to appreciate their approach in including people with disabilities from the very beginning of their programming. It is really a people-centered way of promoting people with disabilities and making sure that they have all it takes to be engaged participants in our communities."

A Renewed Commitment

The Mandela Washington Fellowship has been a catalyst for Ally to reaffirm his focus and commitment to his work in his local community of Zanzibar. After returning home, he put on the first ever Zanzibar Book Fair in collaboration with the Zanzibar Literary Society, featuring a keynote speech from Nobel Laureate Prof. Abdulrazak Gurnah. The event lasted three days and

About the Mandela-Washington Fellowship

The Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is the flagship program of the U.S. government's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). Established in 2014, the Mandela Washington Fellowship has welcomed nearly 6,500 young leaders from every country in Sub-Saharan Africa to the United States for academic and leadership training. The Fellows, between the ages of 25 and 35, are accomplished innovators and leaders in their communities and countries.

To learn more about this program, visit www.mandelawashingtonfellowship.org.

offered visitors the opportunity to participate in panels, book launches, workshops, and poetry readings. Ally enthuses that "We were honored and grateful that some of our guests, coming from seven countries, flew in just to be part of this auspicious event." He also looks forward to hosting the first "Camp Dream. Speak. Live." in Africa. This one-week camp was designed by the Arthur M. Blank Center for Stuttering Education and Research to enhance the leadership and communication skills of young children who stutter.

"I have been more enthusiastic about services I produce and have made connections that will build upon the community engagement work that I do. It has allowed me to see societal challenges in a different light, and coming up with implementable solutions is now the only way forward. I look forward to leveraging the incredible network that I have made to better serve our communities." ■



Along with other Mandela Washington Fellows, Ally (second from right) meets with Governor John Carney during a visit to the Delaware Legislative Hall.