

Local Youth Focus on Leadership

Empowering refugees and immigrants

Approximately 200 African youth between the ages of 12 and 24 at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) for the 5th annual African Youth Leadership Conference.

The purpose of the Aug. 16 conference was to empower refugee and immigrant youth from Africa to succeed in America and to groom them to be the future leaders of their cultural communities in Portland.

In keeping with the nature and purpose of the conference, it was all planned and organized by the youth themselves.

Under the supportive supervision of IRCO's Africa House staff, more than 20 youth on the organizing committee met every Saturday morning for almost three months, leading and staffing committees such as food, volunteers, transportation, workshops, keynote speakers, entertainment and fashion show.

In the process, the young leaders learned about teamwork, compromise, the value of brainstorming, accountability, responsibility and deadlines.

The theme of this year's event was Integrating African and American Cultures, and that theme was evident throughout the four workshops: cultural heritage, higher education, justice system and health.



Amina Mohamed, Suneia Mohamed and other youth listen to speakers.

Dr. Theresa Gibson, Assistant Professor and practitioner of Family Medicine at Oregon Health Sciences University, helped the youth recognize and deal with the confusion when their African culture tells them one thing and the American culture says just the opposite.

For example, in many African cultures lots of body fat is a mark of good health while the American culture says it is evidence of poor health choices; or African culture expects people to marry and begin child bearing in their teens but American culture believes they should wait until later.

Staff members from IRCO's domestic violence services and Brian Davidson, a deputy district attorney for Multnomah

County, also talked about the cultural differences, pointing out that acceptable family behavior in Africa can land people in jail in America.

Davidson also talked about Measure 11 and the serious impact of criminal behavior on youth. He warned them of not just immediate legal actions but a very real probability of being deported when they later apply for citizenship if there is a felony record.

The youth asked Amina Mohamed and Omar Cole to be the keynote speakers because they are African youth who have overcome great difficulties but persevered with their education.

Amina Mohamed talked about fleeing Somalia, living in

a Kenyan refugee camp, coming to America in 1996 when she was 16 years old and starting

high school as a freshman. In addition to not knowing the language, she talked about the difficulties of making the adjustment from living in crowded tents to having to negotiate her way in a large American high school.

Additional struggles were being misunderstood by other students because of religious issues at school, academic burdens, dealing with changing family life between two cultures and the challenge of planning for the future.

In 2007, Mohamed graduated from Portland State University with a Bachelor of Science in social science and black studies, the first person in her family to complete college.

"I pride myself for having the strength and opportunity to go

to school and come out at the end of the tunnel because not only was this my dream, it was also my mother's dream and also set an example for my younger siblings," she said.

Mohamed wants to continue her education to get at Master's degree and she urged the youth to pursue their own dreams, especially of education.

"Know that knowledge will open many doors," she said. "Even though sometimes we struggle, we still have to get up and open more doors because if we don't get up then we cannot triumph at the end," she said.

Other features of the conference included a question and answer forum with two young Portland Police officers, a panel discussion with board members from IRCO's Africa House, an African dance performance by Loveness Wesa and an African fashion show.

Sheriff Candidate is Change Agent

continued ▲ from Front

He holds degrees in business management and communications from Concordia University, a Master's Degree in Business Administration from North Central University in Ari-

zona and is working on a doctoral degree from Taft University in California.

He also teaches criminal justice at Mt. Hood Community College and Pioneer Pacific College.

He lives in northeast Portland where he is married to his wife of

22 years, Aster, a native of the African country of Eritria. They have three sons, Dia, Benyam and Mubarak who are between 18 and 21 years old.

He said family values to him means raising children who are contributing members of the community.

Police Victim's Family Settles

continued ▲ from Front

tutional. A federal judge in Portland rejected the challenge, and an appeals court earlier this year said the policy was not unconstitutional as written.

The city, however, could have been held liable in trial on the question of whether the police violated Perez's constitutional rights.

Mayor Tom Potter issued a statement supporting the settlement, though he said Sery's actions were justified.

"Any loss of life diminishes not only a family and the officers involved, but our entire community. And every death raises old questions of trust between the community and the men and women we have asked to protect us. We must continue working together to break down the stereotypes that keep us from being true partners in building the Portland we all desire."

Potter said. "I hope that the settlement will bring closure to the officers and their families and to the

family of Mr. Perez." Associated Press contributed to this story.

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