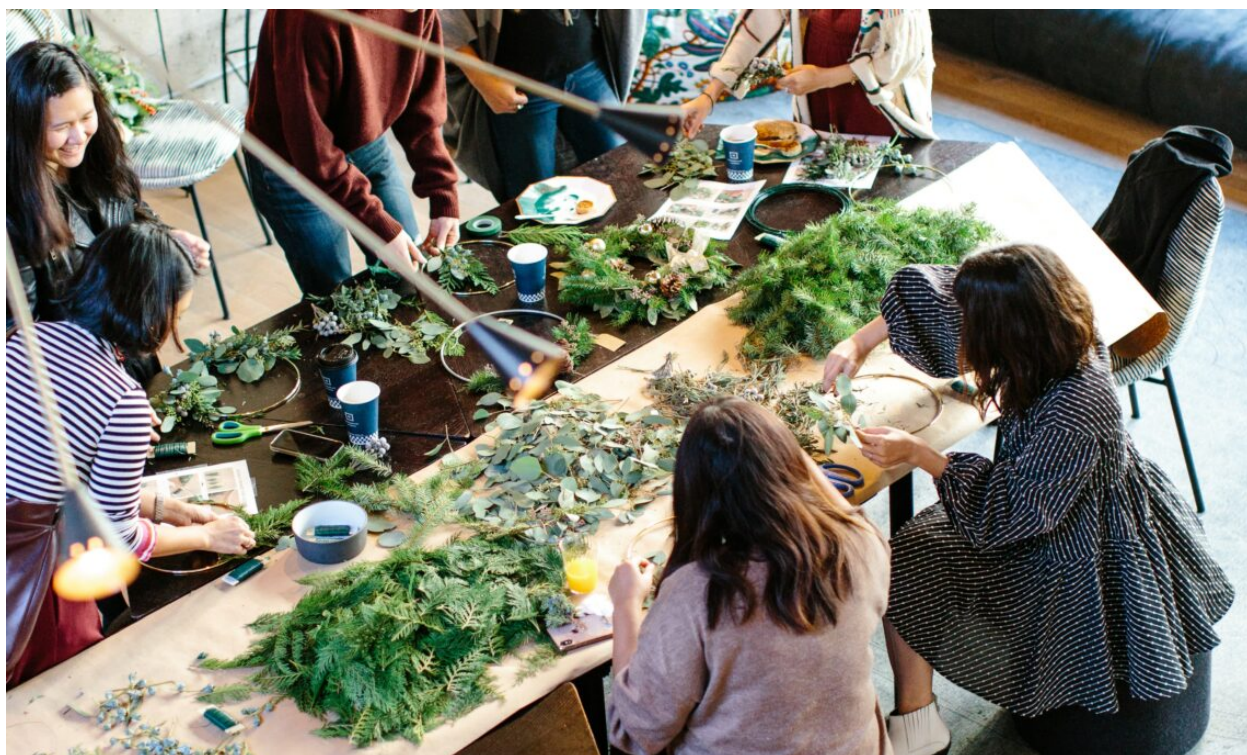


2023 YALI Symposium to be Coordinated in South Africa

By: Michael Gesese-Elsenpeter - February 7, 2023



The Alumni Symposium for the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Institute (YALI) will be held in Boksburg, South Africa this March starting on the 12th through the 18th. The 2021 Fellow cohort, United States government officials, and other partners will pick up right where they left off pre-pandemic by taking the opportunity to discuss, network, and participate in other activities during the gathering.

According to IREX's (International Research & Exchange Board) website, the 2023 Alumni Symposium (event) gives the 2021 Fellowship Alumnis an opportunity to hear from prominent United States and African leaders, discuss critical topics impacting the relationship between

Africa and the United States, and it's an opportunity to bond through team-related activities and networking.

The purpose of the 2023 Alumni Symposium is to deepen the Young African Leaders network across the continent and globally. As President Obama stated, "the objective was to give young Africans the opportunity to come to the United States and develop their skills as the next generation of leaders in civil society and business and government." Unfortunately, coming to America wasn't a reality for the 2021 Participants.

The 2021 Symposium had a total of 700 Fellows back when it was administered virtually, however, only 600 Fellows will be attending the event, according to IREX. In order to attend the 2023 Symposium, Participants are required to be Alumni in good standing and part of the 2021 Mandela Washington Fellowship cohort. To clarify, just because Fellows didn't make the 600 threshold set by the organizers does not mean they are not eligible.

These young African leaders go through a long journey just to submit an application. In President Obama's words, "across the continent young men and women set out on a journey in remote villages with no phones and internet, they navigated the backroads and they traveled by bus and trains to reach larger towns and cities just to get an online application for the program. One young woman from rural Zimbabwe took a five hour bus ride then another six hour bus ride then another seven hour bus ride, a two-day journey just to get her interview."

The pandemic postponed this event from these young resilient African leaders a couple times with the original date being in June of 2020. After the original date was canceled, the secondary date was attempted for the summer of 2021, but that didn't happen due to travel restrictions. The Fellowship took place virtually through Canvas from June through July of 2021. The Fellowship is a short six week experience. The virtual aspect of the Fellowship due to the pandemic was a huge disappointment for the Fellows because the biggest part of the experience was taken away.

The Participants aspiration to come to America and attend one of the 27 colleges and universities across the United States, network with Americans, and witness the democratic institution established here was all revoked from these young African leaders due to the pandemic. This Symposium in South Africa will be an opportunity for face-to-face interactions, networking, and an opportunity for the young African leaders to share their experiences. Some members of the gathering also regard this event as a “celebration of the pandemic resilience and overcoming adversity.” The 2021 YALI group had an experience like none-other due to the pandemic, but their resilience should be celebrated, as we can all recall the pandemic wasn't a fun venture for any of us.

As a young African myself, I'm disappointed that the entire 700 Fellows don't get to partake in the Symposium, particularly when considering the limitation that COVID-19 already had on the experience of the program. An exception should be made to allow all of the 2021 YALI participants to attend the event because they are owed some kind of in-person experience that was promised when they originally applied for the program. The participants travel hundreds of miles by foot, train, and bus to be a part of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young

African Leaders Institute, (YALI) therefore, the program should go above and beyond to ensure the young leaders have the best experience possible.

The program was launched by President Obama back in 2014 to give the youngest continent, Africa, an opportunity to come to the United States and develop their skills in various areas of leadership. As well as, building a network of young African leaders who are futuristic thinkers seeking change and innovation in their respective sectors. Such investment deepens the partnership and connection between the United States and Africa. President Obama at the Young African Leaders Town Hall YALI Summit 2014 announced the new name of the program, naming it after the late great leader of South Africa. “The spirit of this program reflects my divas (Nelson Mandela) optimism, his idealism, his belief in what he called the endless heroism of youth, and so today, with the blessing of the Mandela family, we are proud to announce that the new name of this program is the Mandela Washington Fellowship” - President Obama.

According to the Fellowship, since 2014, just about 5,800 young leaders from every part of Sub-Saharan Africa, between the age of 25 to 35 have cooperated in the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Institute (YALI). The Fellowship in total has received nearly 300,000 applications, the 2021 Alumni Fellows total 700 members. Applications are open across all of the 49 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, however, in order to qualify one must be between the age of 25-35 years old, and must be promoting positive change within their communities.

The United States Department of State began the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders program, it's funded by the U.S. Government, but IREX (International Exchange & Research Board) adminstrats it. The program is a United States Government funded and owned program, and it's IREX's duty to manage and operate it. Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, U.S. the Department of State said, "building a strong partnership with the countries of Africa is a foreign policy priority for the United States because Africa is shaping the future. By the year 2050, 1 in 4 people on earth will be African, Africa is a continent of young people, energized, innovative, eager for opportunity."

In order to put the vision of the United States Government to work, the International Research and Exchange Board headquartered in the nation's capital, Washington DC has the privilege of working with these young leaders. IREX is a non-profit organization looking to create a more just, prosperous, inclusive society for all across the globe. Not only is the Mandela Fellowship one of IREX's many programs, it also is one of its most prominent ones . This non-profit organization seeks to create a better world by focusing on education and creating global institutions that are people-centric. IREX cooperates with 100 countries globally, across different continents like the Americas, Africa, and Europe, with the goal of creating an inclusive institution that will give each person an opportunity to reach their full potential. In those 100 countries, just last year, they trained 8,250 teachers and supported 500 institutions.

Three IREX members will be attending the 2023 Alumni Fellowship in South Africa including the CEO, Kristin Lord, country representative for East Africa, George Kogolla, and deputy director of strategic communications, Jackie Jena. Their primary objective for their attendance is to be there for the young African leaders as a networking opportunity.

Jena said she was most looking forward to seeing and hearing the progress that the young leaders have made within their communities. This program is close to heart for Jena because she started her tenure with IREX working in the YALI program. In fact, prior to moving over to IREX, Jena was working with African Leadership Foundation, as the External Relations Manager helping to build private funding and support for the African Leadership Academy based in South Africa. “I walk away inspired by these young men and women every time I see them because of the impact they have had on their communities. I am filled with hope and inspiration seeing these young people.” Jena hopes to get stories and news of what the leaders have been doing to share with people at IREX. In regards to the significance of the YALI Fellowship to IREX, according to Jena, “The Mandela Washington Fellowship is a fulfillment of IREX’s mission, impacting people, and impacting leaders who are impacting people. The program demonstrates what IREX is trying to do.”

“Africa is poised to become one of the world's most important economic regions with the power to shape the global economy” - Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, United States Department of State. This is one of the reasons that President Barack Obama invested in Africa back in 2014, because Africa is the future. The people of Africa, according to Jackie Jenna “are not interested in aid, they are interested in opportunity.” America has the ability to grant that opportunity that

these young Africans so desperately need. These young leaders want an opportunity to education because through education all their dreams can become reality. One of Africa's finest leaders, Nelson Mandela once said, "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Works Cited

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