



AYAN HERSI

Young Woman of Distinction 2008



Ayan Hersi is the antidote to a culture saturated with stories of starlets famous only for being infamous. The 2008 YWCA Young Woman of Distinction has already grappled with more than her fair share of the world's ills. Her response has been leadership, dedication and constructive role-modeling among her peers. As a young Somali refugee growing up in Canada, Ayan experienced her father's deportation, and her mother's subsequent struggle to raise five children on social assistance.

With the strong backing of her determined mother, Ayan drew on the resilience she had witnessed among the Somali women she and her family came to know in refugee camps in Kenya, and resolved to be the first of her family to graduate from university. Assuming a leadership role in AIDS education, anti-violence advocacy, and anti-racism at the University of Toronto and internationally, Ayan Hersi has emerged as an early role model to her peers. She intends to use the Julia Ruby Fund that comes with her award to pursue a law degree in Women's Health, Immigration and Human Rights and a Masters degree in Public Policy in order to advocate for women in Canada and internationally.

Ayan Hersi took up the call of leadership at an early age. In high school, she declared her intention to be president of her school's student council. When she was told by fellow students that a black girl would never achieve such a post and should run instead for a less demanding position, she became more determined to run and win. Bolstered by her mother's support, she campaigned and won, becoming the first black young woman to be president of her high school. In the aftermath of September 11th when Muslim students at her high school experienced an increase in bullying, threats and insults, Ayan developed an anti-racism campaign. She also developed the Young Women's Leadership Program at her school, ensuring that young women who might otherwise be marginalized had the opportunity to discuss their experiences and build their skills.

Never forgetting the world she had to leave behind, Ayan is passionate about international development. She has spearheaded human rights training for women in Namibia, Kenya and Somalia, advocating their presence at decision-making tables. A valued part of the United Nations Development Program, Ayan spent the summer of 2007 in Namibia as part of a University of Toronto HIV/AIDS academic field project. Easily the most pressing issue for African women, Ayan tackled the taboos of AIDS education, using tools such as popular theatre and art. Together, she and the community's girls and women produced a video distributed in Canada and parts of Africa. Living as part of the



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community despite considerable risk of violence, Ayan worked in solidarity with local women and girls to advocate for anonymous HIV/AIDS testing centres, counselling, and treatment and prevention programs. Ayan took her campaign beyond the local level and lobbied policy makers in Namibia to implement successful HIV/AIDS prevention programs that rely on indigenous systems. Breaking through considerable resistance, the project was recognized by the Namibian media for challenging misconceptions of HIV/AIDS in Namibia. The young women involved in the project were also invited to perform their educational theatre in parliament.

Ayan augments her volunteer tutoring by supporting disabled students, ensuring they receive accommodations and financial assistance to succeed in school. She has also been named the first Honorary Ambassador for the University of Toronto, for her international work on AIDS Prevention.

Ayan is the founder of Youth in Touch, a non-profit youth led organization that provides young people with access to networking skills, money management, legal rights and access to education.

For her tenacity, vision and commitment to improving the lives of women and girls with all she brings to life, Ayan Hersi is the 2008 Young Woman of Distinction.