

‘Rising city-builders’ strive to make their mark

DiverseCity program brings together young leaders from diverse array of fields and birthplaces

Daniel Dale, Staff Reporter
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Donna-Michelle St. Bernard says it casually, as if revealing plans to eat a sandwich for lunch and not plans to write 54 plays about Africa.

From almost anyone else, the latter declaration would seem laughable. St. Bernard, however, has already completed and staged *Gas Girls*, a play about Zimbabwean prostitutes. She thinks she will finish four more plays about four countries this year. And she has 15 rough drafts “on the back burner” until she has “time to deal with them.”

That might be a while. St. Bernard, a rapper-playwright-director-speaker-activist who also manages to have a day job as general manager of the non-profit Native Earth Performing Arts, cannot actually find a spare moment on this Thursday afternoon to eat her lunchtime sandwich. During a telephone interview in between appearances at an Etobicoke student fundraising event for an orphanage in Kenya, the 32-year-old stops mid-sentence and apologizes: She is literally out of breath.

“Time,” she says ruefully. “The thing I don’t have.”

This, at least, she has in common with the 26 other 2010 DiverseCity fellows. The year-long fellowship program, part of a joint initiative between the Toronto City Summit Alliance and Maytree, a charity, brings together a disparate array of frighteningly busy young professionals who are thought to be “rising city-builders.”

This year’s crop, feted at an event Thursday night, includes lawyers, corporate managers, entrepreneurs, community outreach workers, health workers and public employees. They hail from such distant locales as Jordan, Bangladesh, Ghana and Guyana. Yet, even in their first meetings, they found common ground.

“Sometimes I sit in the room and I look around, and I’m like, ‘Lawyer, banker, lawyer, health services worker, economist, teacher, doctor – *MC?*’” St. Bernard says with a laugh. (She hails from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.)

“But then you find out this one’s a photographer, and that one writes poetry. We’re not all that different.”

The DiverseCity fellows attend workshops and devise city-improving projects. Niranjan Vivekanandan, a 34-year-old Sri Lanka-born vice president in commercial banking at RBC, says he finds it “a little presumptuous at this stage” to call himself a city-builder. He says, however, that the program will better position fellows to “have an impact down the road.”

“I hope to be able to leverage my background and expertise for the group, to try to build some partnerships between the public and private and not-for-profit, for the benefit of our city,” he says.

St. Bernard hopes the program will help her learn how to make a difference working within mainstream power structures.

“I’ve spent a long time working outside the system,” she says. “And it’s now my intention through DiverseCity to learn a little bit about how to be effective in it as well.”

The DiverseCity fellows

Suhail Abualsameed Newcomer community engagement coordinator, Sherbourne Health Centre. From Jordan; has worked with immigrant and refugee gays and lesbians and on Muslim health

Wendell Adjetey Case manager/employment counsellor, JVS Toronto. From Ghana; works on gang prevention and intervention program; founded youth mentorship and education non-profit

Gelek Badheysang Communications & outreach manager, Greenest City. Tibetan refugee from Nepal; co-founded organization to help integrate newcomer youth into cultural sector

Inka Bari Manager, advisory services, KPMG. From Bangladesh; member of KPMG’s IT advisory team; certified project management professional; passion for painting.

Fabio Crespin Host program supervisor, Woodgreen Community Services. From Brazil; worked for investment bank and development agency; travelled the world teaching scuba diving

Saumya Gautam Talent acquisition & diversity consultant, CBC. From India; has worked in various positions related to cross-cultural communications; has also been involved on peace-building initiatives

Bilal Khan Legal counsel, Cignias. Has worked on UN project on the use of corporate law to encourage corporations to respect human rights

Farheen Khan Consultant & community outreach coordinator, Fsk Associates & United Way of Peel Region. Works on capacity building projects; author of *From Behind the Veil*

Karen Kun Publisher, *Corporate Knights*; Co-founder, Waterlution. *Corporate Knights* is a magazine on responsible business; Waterlution is a non-profit devoted to sustainable use of water

Colin Lacey Project manager, Evergreen. Leads community engagement, restoration and stewardship activities in Downsview Park and the GTA. Involved with Banyan Youth in St. James Town

Tinashe Mafukidze Consultant, Carte Blanche Associates. From Zimbabwe; new media strategist; founder of Immigrant Youth Canada, dedicated to empowering refugee and immigrant youth

Nishanthini Nagaratnam Community grants developer, Youth Challenge Fund. Develops strategic partnerships in city's priority neighbourhoods; founding member of the 555 Toronto Scouts and Tamil Students Leadership Training Project

Jasvir Nijjar Major gifts officer, United Way Toronto. Responsible for soliciting and cultivating organization's major donors; manages network of volunteers; committed volunteer

Julius Nyarko Policy advisor, Gaming Policy Branch, Ontario Ministry of Finance. Chair of the BBPA Leaders of Tomorrow Conference; has worked for major banks

Adaoma Patterson Specialist, Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee, Region of Peel. From Winnipeg; part of team responsible for guiding committee's work; member of the board of Jamaican Canadian Association and Horace Patterson Foundation

Crystal Perryman Mark Community development consultant, Malton Community Health Centre/Bramalea Community Health Centre. Co-founder of Malton Moms advocacy group; an equity educator and poet.

Hena Prasanna Program manager, Cisco Systems. From India; 15 years of experience in technology industry; board member at Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention.

Katie Rabinowicz Project coordinator, Sustain Ontario & Environment Program Officer, Metcalf Foundation. Co-launched Multistory Complex, a planning organization that helped change Ontario's street food regulations.

Salima Rawji Project manager, SmartCentres. From B.C.; manages a countrywide retail portfolio; has structured venture capital deals and produced successful cultural festivals.

Tanya Rumble Health promoter, Halton Region Health Department. Raised in United Arab Emirates; experience in government relations, public health, non-profit, public administration and research sectors.

Melanie Smith Senior human resources consultant (employment equity), City of Toronto. From Guyana; formerly executive director of MediaWatch and corporate diversity manager at TD Bank Financial Group.

Raj Sohi Interim deputy administrative director – Addiction, Child, Youth and Family Program, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. From Kenya; has held several CAMH leadership positions.

Sharaf Sultan Associate, Rubin Thomlinson LLP. Holds master's degree in development economics; worked as a consultant for the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

Melissa Tapper Health planner, South Riverdale Community Health Centre. Born in U.K., raised in Vancouver; has done community-based programming in Toronto, Vancouver, Israel and Fiji.

Jasmine Tehara Associate vice president, wealth management, TD Bank Financial Group. From B.C.; leads process improvement team for TD wealth management business; involved with The Learning Partnership.

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