



Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

AUGUST 3-4, 2021 | VIRTUAL

Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

Kitaw Biniam Ignite Talk Transcript

Speakers

- Kitaw Biniam, 2021 Mandela Washington Fellow, Ethiopia

Session Transcript

Gutema Rufo was born on a day in September in 1919. He was born in a small village in Wollega in the western part of Ethiopia. His parents were farmers who he, unfortunately, didn't get to know. The Spanish Flu had Ethiopia at the time and claimed both their lives. And so like many children, Gutema was raised by the village at the tender age of twelve. He had become a man and now had to fend for himself. "Go west, young man," except that he actually went East to the capital, Addis Ababa. After a perilous 600-kilometer walk, barefoot of course, he had finally made it. But what is a twelve-year-old orphan, in a big city where he knows absolutely no one, going to do?

Fortunately, he went to the American Mission where an American man took him into his home. Gutema would perform household chores like washing the dog, in exchange he would get a roof over his head, but more importantly, he'd get to go to school and learn. He would go on to become an avid learner, and then, even became a teacher in his own right. After he got married and had six children, he insisted that all of them, including his three girls, get educated as well. And this was by no means an easy decision because of the prevailing mentalities of the time, but he insisted.

His eldest daughter, Hannah, not only excelled in high school, but went on to college and even to France to pursue her higher education. She returned to serve her country and community in many different ways. Now Gutema was born in 1919 in a small village in Wollega. Today, just over 100 years later, his grandson, son of Hannah, has the privilege to speak at the 2021 Mandela Washington Fellowship in front of distinguished guests from all over Africa and the U.S. That is the power of education.

Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world." And let's be clear, education is not just about fancy degrees or PhDs. It's about thinking critically. It's about learning how to solve concrete problems, but it's also about learning empathy, listening, and caring for others. Education sets values: it teaches us to be our brother's keeper and our sister's keeper. Education raises aspirations, it builds resilience, and, ultimately, it enriches lives. It is truly a weapon that can change the world.



Think about it: how much better would the world be if every single one of us had access to education in some form? But we are agonizingly far from that ideal. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, there are 773 million illiterate adults around the world, and most of them are women. And this does not get better on our continent. Across Africa, nine million girls between the ages of six to eleven will never get to go to school at all. What a loss. I mean, let's face it. All of us here are privileged. We are standing on the shoulders of giants that have come before us and, because of that, it is our duty to improve these statistics in any way that we can. And there are many ways to contribute, no matter what your background is.

I'm working in Ethiopia with Camara Education, and we try to improve education through technology. In Ethiopia alone, we have given access to computers to 1.5 million students since 2011. But we have a long way to go and can use all the help that we can get. There's a Chinese proverb that says, "If your plan is for one year, plant rice. If your plan is for 10 years, plant trees. If your plan is for a hundred years, educate people."

Now, some hundred years after his birth, my grandfather is no longer with us, but his education helped, not just his children, grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren, but all the people he served while he was alive. He had served his community with all his heart until he could. Now, I'd like you to think of your grandparents and how their lives have impacted yours and the people in your community. Lots of interesting stories I imagine. Now, think of your grandchildren and how your life will impact theirs and the people in that community. Pass it on!

It is our responsibility to ensure that this generation and the one following it has access to inclusive education in some shape or form. We cannot accept a world where any person, regardless of where they are from or what they look like, doesn't have access to education. And so in any way that you can, I urge each and every one of you: Dare to plan for 100 years. Dare to educate people. Thank you!