



Alia Abdulahi: 2011 Samantha Smith Award Recipient *Changing Minds, Changing Communities*

Part of "Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine"

Written by Janice Rogers

The first thing you notice when you speak with Alia Abdulahi is her voice – her unbridled enthusiasm, optimism, and vision come ringing through. As a young Somali woman growing up in Auburn, she has always felt compelled to speak out whenever she witnesses biased comments or racial harassment. She explains, "When I hear someone make a joke or an ignorant comment about my heritage, I speak up and tell them why that's wrong and what the truth really is, to clear up whatever

misconceptions and stereotypes they may have." She began to raise her voice in elementary school, when she was picked as a student leader to go to City Hall and discuss issues of race and bias with coordinators from the Center for Preventing Hate. It was then that she learned about and "fell in love with" the Unity Project, a collaboration between the Center for Preventing Hate and middle and high school students. The Unity Project is devoted to developing student leaders who can address issues of bias

// When I hear someone make a joke or an ignorant comment about my heritage, I speak up and tell them why that's wrong and what the truth really is, to clear up whatever misconceptions and stereotypes they may have. //



and harassment in their communities. Along with students from all over New England, Alia attended the Center's summer program at University of Maine, Farmington, and there she learned about conflict resolution and developed her leadership skills.

When asked about where she learned to speak up, Alia points to the women in her family, all of whom inspire her again and again. "My mother, my grandmother, and my aunt! My grandmother is the loudest, most outspoken woman I've ever known. All of them have taught me to not to worry about what others think, and to always say what's on my mind," she enthuses. It is clearly a lesson she has taken to heart, and has made her a leader among her peers.

In addition to teaching her to address injustice, Alia's role models have taught her empathy and compassion. She recognizes that her peers and neighbors who make ignorant comments or who invoke stereotypes may have been raised to believe that such things are true. Rather than getting angry, Alia seizes the opportunity to educate one-on-one in the moment, and she gets great satisfaction when she feels she has changed someone's mind and taught them to reconsider their ideas about racial difference, unfamiliar cultures or community conflict.

With the support of her family and the Unity Project, Alia encourages others, including her siblings, to raise their voices against bias and hate. When her brother shared a story with her about a

friend who was ridiculed because he had lesbian parents, she told him not to stay quiet and to support his friend the next time the harassment occurred. Thanks to Alia, he did.

Alia is an uncommonly busy young woman. In addition to being class president, a top student (though she admits to feeling a little "summer-itis" lately), a leader for her school's Unity Project, and the student representative for the Auburn School committee, she is also organizing a Somali youth group in her community. For Alia, the aim of the group is to help Somali youth adapt to American culture and maintain and celebrate their Somali heritage.

Alia plans to continue her education after high school and is considering a major in political science. No matter where her studies take her, she wants to continue to make her community a better place. She hopes to build a bridge between immigrants and native Mainers by helping people better understand each other. "My mother taught me not to be afraid to speak up when I see someone doing something wrong," she relates. Alia's confidence, spirit, and advocacy have already made a big difference in fostering understanding in her community.

What are you doing to change your community? Tell us.

