

## **Global Ambassador: USI's Takaendesa among Africa's 25 Outstanding Emerging Women Leaders**

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This summer, University of Southern Indiana sophomore Florence Takaendesa of Zimbabwe was surprised to learn that she had been selected as one of Africa's Most Outstanding Emerging Women Leaders by the Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership in Africa.

She is one of only 25 Moremi Initiative Leadership and Empowerment Development (MILEAD) Fellows chosen from more than 3,020 applicants in 44 countries. This select group "represents Africa's most promising young women leaders, with the courage and commitment to lead and shape the future of Africa." MILEAD Fellows are chosen through a highly competitive selection process and criteria based on their outstanding leadership promise, community service accomplishments and commitment to the advancement of women in Africa.

Raised by a single mother in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, throughout primary and high school, Takaendesa was recognized as a leader, advocating for girls and children's rights in Zimbabwe and working on issues related to HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and school drop-out rates. She volunteered at an orphanage in Chiedza, Zimbabwe, teaching students and starting an arts and crafts club that conserves the environment by making crafts out of reused paper and plastic.

She received a Global Ambassador Scholarship to attend USI where she is majoring in mathematics with a minor in economics. Her dream is to get into politics and address the challenges faced by her country, as well as the entire continent of Africa. "My parents couldn't afford to send me to college," she said. "If it wasn't for the scholarship I received from USI, I wouldn't be in college, and I wouldn't have been selected for this honor. When other universities didn't see potential in me, USI believed in me. They saw my potential, and helped me succeed."

Her commitment to women's issues has been evident during her time at the University. She is co-founder and treasurer of Kesho, a new student organization focused on developing international women's leadership skills. She also serves as vice president of the International Club, as a member of the Pott College of Science, Engineering, and Education student advisory board, as a Student Ambassador, and is a member of USI's Honors Program.

"She is extremely determined, dedicated and disciplined," said Dr. Ronald Rochon, USI provost, who met Takaendesa and her mother during the selection process for the Global Ambassador Scholarship, and since has become a mentor for her. "Her determination is linked with service, and that is what is refreshing about Florence – it's not just about good grades, it's about getting a seat at the table so she can create change."

Takaendesa recently returned from Ghana where she not only accepted the fellowship, but also deliberated with national leaders in Ghana, including the ministries of education and health, to decide on a project she will work on as part of her commitment for the MILEAD Fellows Program. She has one year to launch the project, which is required to demonstrate a lasting impact and facilitate real change in the country.

Her dream is to create an education center for children in her hometown of Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. The center would provide educational opportunities including books, computers and a library. Takaendesa herself didn't start learning about computers until she was 17 years old, and was surprised to hear how different that is here. She wants children in her hometown to be able to explore technology at a much earlier age.

Getting her project under way will require a large time commitment and connections in Africa, balanced with the studies required to complete her degree at USI. To overcome the financial and logistical challenges, she plans to start small and work toward larger goals. She has \$1,000 in grant seed money provided by the Moremi Initiative, but is also looking to partner with other organizations and groups to fund and implement her project.

During her trip to Africa, she met the rest of the 25 Moremi Fellows. "I was truly inspired," she said. "Some of these women have done wonders. They're already doing great things. I heard their words and their stories of positive change. I can now see the range of what is possible. It was an honor to be connected with these women from across Africa.

"I want to see Africa get better," she added. "I know that I want to do something that brings real change. I feel like a leader already, regardless of my selection for this honor."