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today

Members of the Young African Leaders Initiative volunteer with Oceans of Love, a local organization that helps children who have cancer. MIKE DESOCIO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

African students visit Toms River

Painting pots for pediatric cancer patients

By Francesca Cocchi @FNCocchi

TOMS RIVER—The multilingual lyrics to South Africa's national anthem — Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika — could be heard Friday morning in the otherwise quiet Riverfront Landing Park.

The voices came from 25 members of President Barack Obama's Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, who spent an hour serving the community in honor of Nelson Mandela Day. Alongside Wagner College professors Jason Fitzgerald and Donald Stearns, the group painted pots for pediatric cancer patients and cleaned the park's Children's Memorial Garden.

"We're showing love and unity, which is what Mandela would have loved," said Lalumbe Makuya, 27, of South Africa.

The fellows are 500 sub-Saharan Africans, ages 25 to 35, who were competitively selected to stay at 20 universities in the United States and hone their skills in civic leadership, public management or business and entrepreneurship. Many of them will use those skills working with nonprofits groups in their home countries.

Makuya, for example, is a civil engineering technician and the founder of the Naledi Foundation — an organization that identifies under-performing rural schools and finds ways to improve their academic performance and mentor their students.

"They're honestly some of the smartest people I know," said Fitzgerald, Wagner's academic coordinator for the program and an assistant professor of education.

As a host university, Wagner College organized six weeks of classroom sessions and service activities, such as Friday's cleanup. The fellows staying at Wagner, who represent 17 countries, study pillars of civic leadership including economic development, health care, education and, this week, the environment.

"This week was more about how you deal with acute issues, like a chemical spill," Fitzgerald said.

The fellows also met with Ocean of Love co-found

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The flagship program for President Barack Obama's Young African Leaders Initiative, The Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders provides young leaders from sub-Saharan Africa with the opportunity to hone their skills at an university in the United States. All 500 fellows will meet Aug. 4 in Washington for the president's U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.

der Linda Gillick on Tuesday. Ocean of Love is a charitable organization dedicated to helping more than 250 Ocean County children with cancer and their families.

The group talked about civic leadership with Gillick and the connection between environmental contamination and cancer in Toms River. Inspired by Gillick's presentation, the fellows shared testimonies before following her to the memorial garden off Water Street.

For Linda Simon, 26, of Tanzania hearing Gillick's story was the beginning of a new perspective. As a medical student, Simon bonded with many pediatric cancer patients only to find their beds empty the next day.

"(Parents say) 'My kid is going to die, but it's God's plan,'" Simon said. "You weep, and you move on."

In her letter to Gillick, Simon wrote she now sees new possibilities related to issues such as cancer. She specifically recalled watching children play in a stream that ran between Tanzanian homes, its water dyed purple and blue from textile industry runoff. Simon questions the connection between the contaminated water and diseases that she has seen.

"We are now equipped to make the change our countries need," said Johannes Arthur, 30, of Ghana — an artist who uses waste materials to create products such as eco-friendly furniture.

"Perseverance with passion always yields results," he said. "In every facet of life, wherever you find a problem, these are the things that will push you."