

2015 Outstanding Youth Award: Milen Melles

Milen is a university of Toronto student in her first year studying Humanities. She has excelled in school, and was the recipient of the Jerome Henry 2015 Award. As well, she is on the honour roll. She has demonstrated unwavering commitment to the youth in her community and school by advocating for them and participating in various activities to address the issues and needs of Ethiopian and Eritrean youth and the black community. Milen has a strong focus on education and expressing yourself through art.

Milen has attended events at her school, which focus on supporting visible minorities on campus, and has become a voice for the group. She often will write opinion pieces for their main publication.

Milen has empowered other students to use their creative talents to express themselves. She has provided students with the opportunity to present their art on stage to larger communities. An example being "#RealTalks 2.0: Black Mental Health". Milen was able to have two youth talk about their experiences with mental health. Milen also invited members of her community to perform their music and spoken word at a community event titled "Basement Jam".

Milen thrives on celebrating excellence in her community. She volunteers with an organization to present an art exhibition consisting of pieces by Ethiopian and Eritrean Youth on mental health. Milen is also on her school art committee and is in the process of planning an event for Black History Month.

Milen reached out to a local Ethiopian youth group and partnered with them to create a new project. They wanted to innovate a social media campaign to bring attention to mental health of Black Youth, which is generally a taboo topic in her community. They created videos and posters to grab attention of the youth on social media. She was able to manage Twitter and Facebook accounts as she wanted to reach youth where they were at. She went on to work with this group to create an event bringing 70 Black youth from Toronto together to discuss individual and collective mental health.

Milen reached out to organizers of the Young Diplomats to create an event geared towards high school students. She wanted to set up a mentor-facilitated conversation to give advice to first generation Canadian teenagers on resources to help them make informed decisions about their future. She was able to host her first event in January 2016.

Milen also mentors Eritrean and Ethiopian grade twelve students applying to post secondary, as she feels when they can relate to someone who has been through the process it does not seem as overwhelming. She has even received calls from parents asking for her support for their children.

Milen has volunteered in fundraising for cancer research in Toronto. She organized a collaborative Eritrean-Canadian Cancer Walk. They now plan on making this an annual event due to the positive turn out.

In addition to the above, Milen worked together with a group of five Eritrean female youth to put together a display piece for their elder community members in accordance with International Women's Day. She delivered a speech in recognition of the females in their community who played an important role in their heritage.

It is due to Milen's dedication and involvement with her school and local community that she is the winner of the 2015 Outstanding Youth Award.