

Young leaders, including Bermuda's Stacey Smith, lead cultural shift in the desert

Diversity is what makes this world great

By Stacey Smith

Community involvement can lead to unforeseen possibilities.

Last December, I attended a United Nations forum in Doha, Qatar, a unique, rapidly developing city bordered by Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf where sand and ancient Arabian architecture rub shoulders with an eye-catching cluster of skyscrapers.

It was the fourth forum held by the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC). I participated as both a youth moderator and representative of the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People.

Heads of state, ministers of foreign affairs, non-governmental organisations, representatives of civil society, youth associations, foundations, media, academia and members of the corporate sector from across the globe congregated on the Middle Eastern peninsula.

Hosted by Qatar under the auspices of Sheikha Moza Bint Fasser, the Doha Forum consisted of a series of panel discussions on topics ranging from migration to religion and human rights. All were rooted in the issue of the neglected link between cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue and sustainable development, demonstrating that such factors are complementary to the UN Millennium development goals agenda.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the Doha Forum also aimed to renew the international community's commitment to put cultural diversity and intercultural understanding first, in or-

der to reshape the global agenda for tolerance, dialogue, human security, peace and development.

My involvement began as one of 18 young people asked to moderate an online youth forum which lasted for three weeks last November.

During that period the opinions of global youths on the following themes of the Doha Forum were expressed: How Does Cultural Diversity Matter to Development? The Missing Link: Promoting Trust and Tolerance to Advance Development Goals and New Strategies for Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation.

The comments were summarised into a report that was presented to world leaders in Doha.

When the opportunity to attend the forum arose, I applied and was successful. In fact, the majority of the online co-moderators were able to attend the forum as well as the youth event on December 10. In addition to introducing ourselves and the youth organisations that we represented during the opening ceremony of the youth event, we moderated round-table discussions involving around 400 young people from over 100 countries.

The key messages that I obtained from the forum were the importance of having a sound, culturally broad education throughout one's life (including a deep level of knowledge about one's own cultural history), and the need to promote and increase funding for cultural exchange opportunities where youths can learn through immersion. The value of incorporating new



They've got the whole world in their hands: Stacey Smith with other young people in Doha, Qatar.

strategies for intercultural learning both within and outside of the classroom, for example through arts and sports programmes, was also expressed, as was the importance of giving young people a platform not only to share their views and participate in decision-making and implementing plans.

The need to address basic social needs in societies worldwide was stressed, as well as that of avoiding the imposition of one culture's ideals onto another, un-

less it is in contrast with fundamental international human rights.

Such ideas must be supported from the grassroots through to governmental levels in order to be effective, we heard.

The forum demonstrated the great potential we all have when the focus is on our similarities, rather than differences. The whole experience was amazing and one particularly meaningful moment was when a Jordanian journalist asked me what the

maximum age is to obtain the Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award. Although she had achieved her bronze and silver awards in Jordan, she wanted to complete the highest level, but had been out of touch with the programme for a while. That brief conversation demonstrated the universality of the youth programme that I was honoured to represent.

As I walked each day throughout the vast state-of-the-art Qatar National Convention

Center amidst men and women dressed so elegantly in abayas and thobes, a rich element of meaning was added to a poignant statement made by an audience member. He said: "We all are minorities in the world."

Stacey Smith is a Duke of Edinburgh Award leader and the chairwoman of the organisation's communications and public relations committee.

For more information on the UNAOC Doha Forum visit www.qatar4unaoc.org.