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## From Freetown to Steeltown, a young entrepreneur on the rise



Cassandra Chin

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February 22, 2013

May-Marie Duwai-Sowa left her war-torn home in Sierra Leone in search of peace.

Duwai-Sowa was in her second year of university in West Africa when violence erupted.



"The civil war brought a level of unpredictability to the situation and my family decided to move to the United States at that point," she explained.

"I first came (to New Jersey) when it was summer and I found it too cold during the winter and fall seasons so I moved back home."

In January 1998, war reached her home in Freetown and she fled to New Jersey to stay with her uncle and focus on completing her degree.

She immigrated in 1999, completed a sociology degree from Rider University in New Jersey in 2001, before moving to Ontario in 2003 to pursue her masters degree in sociology and international development at the University of Guelph.

"My plan was always to go home or work overseas," the 35-year-old chuckled. "I never intended to stay here but that hasn't been the case, so now I don't make plans anymore."

Soon after graduating from the University of Guelph, she moved to Burlington with her husband and new daughter, and commuted to work to Hamilton.

She made the permanent move to Hamilton in 2008.



In addition to her role as an [access and equity specialist with the City of Hamilton](#), Duwai-Sowa is now the publisher and Editor-in-Chief of [Illuminence](#), an new online magazine that will feature and celebrate women in Hamilton.

"The desire to establish Illuminence stemmed from my passion to celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of women," she explained.

"Growing up, I was inspired by my grandmother, mom, aunts and lots of inspirational women. I'm always inspired by the tremendous accomplishments of women, most of who are unsung heroines."

As a young professional in Hamilton, she felt uninspired and isolated from the rest of the city outside of her immediate family and friends.

"I wasn't aware of any young professional women's networks in Hamilton where I could connect with other like-minded young women and network, socialize or form partnerships to engage in various initiatives," she added, noting there are now young professional groups that have emerged over the last few years.

However, the aim of Illuminence is to provide a platform for women to enhance professional growth and development.

"I've always had a passion for women empowerment and gender issues," she said. "I hadn't planned to create a women's magazine ... but when I mentioned it out loud, there was interest."

The idea for the online magazine formed last year with the original plan set for Illuminence to become a quarterly print magazine.

After much discussion with her team members she met at a networking event, it was decided that since everything is going online, so would they.

"There are so many exemplary women doing remarkable things within our community and we need to start celebrating our own successes and accomplishments," said Duwai-Sowa.

"Illuminence will also be showcasing legacies and by illuminating legacies in our community, we can learn from the wisdom and experiences of these pioneers and community champions."

As a mother of two children, she is excited by the opportunity to inspire her son and daughter with examples of inspiring women showcased in Illuminence.

Duwai-Sowa noted they hope to establish a membership-based Young Professional Women's Network that will be dedicated to the professional development, networking, employability enhancement and social mobility of young women.

This network will also coincide with a series of signature events each year, she said.

Illuminence will hold a launch event March 8 at [Radius Café](#) from 8 to 10 a.m.

*This is part of a series during Black History Month dedicated to highlighting successful entrepreneurs in the community.*

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City of Hamilton

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