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Abigail Santos

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April 16, 2013

Not many people in business can say they have met their idol, the person who inspired their company.

May-Marie Duwai-Sowa is one of the lucky few. Duwai-Sowa met her hero, Oprah Winfrey.

She was one of the 12,000 who spent Saturday night with the media mogul at Copps Coliseum. She was also one of the select few who got VIP passes to meet Winfrey backstage before the show.

It was a dream come true for the Hamilton entrepreneur.

As Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *Illuminence*, a Hamilton e-magazine celebrating female leaders and inspirations in the city, Duwai-Sowa believes there are many parallels between not only their personal lives, but also between Winfrey's media ventures and her own online publication.

On the outside, there are the noticeable traits they share: both



May-Marie Duwai-Sowa.



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women are black, strong and are making a mark in the media. But the similarities don't stop there.

Winfrey and Duwai-Sowa lived through personal hardships before they found success. Family troubles, displacement from their homes due to poverty and war, ups and downs in business, and racial discrimination are some things they experienced; and overcame.

Professionally, Winfrey and Duwai-Sowa are dedicated to the use of media as a positive platform.

The Oprah Winfrey Show entertained and enlightened viewers across the globe for 25 years. Currently, Winfrey is the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Creative Officer of her network, OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network, a multi-platform media venture designed to entertain, inform and inspire people to live their best lives.

Illuminescence was launched in Hamilton by Duwai-Sowa nearly two months ago. The goal for the online magazine is to showcase female leaders from various professional and ethnic backgrounds in Hamilton.

Positive reinforcement is important to both women.

"Oprah is aware she's a racialized person from poverty, and she uses OWN to show people that staying strong will let you overcome negative things," says Duwai-Sowa.

While *Illuminescence* celebrates people making a difference in the community, it is a venue where praise is given to people for what they do.

"When you are celebrated and commended for what you're doing, it allows you to know what you did well, to set a higher goal for yourself, and it inspires others to do more in their lives. It's a nice circle of creating positive reinforcement," states the publisher.

Winfrey was one of the major influences for the magazine, but Duwai-Sowa believes Winfrey touched her life even before she became a business women.

She has "always been an inspiration ever since I was little. I looked at people on television, and she was the one person I related to. She seemed real and genuine. Something about the way she interacted with her guests, the way she communicated, the way she loves people; these are some of the reasons why I connect to her as a role model. These are some of the reasons why I started *Illuminescence*."

After the show Duwai-Sowa excitedly told YourHamiltonBiz that she loved Winfrey 1,000 times more. When asked why, Duwai-Sowa referenced two main points Winfrey made and why they resonated with her and what she is doing with her magazine:

- Winfrey: "You don't have a cause without an intention"

- Duwai-Sowa: "My intention with *Illuminescence* Magazine is to use it as a platform to celebrate women and inspire women to have a meaningful and purposeful life. We must all be conscious of our surroundings and interactions."

- Winfrey: "Your life is speaking to you, are you paying attention to the whisper?"

- Duwai-Sowa: "I believe that once you start to pay attention to what you're doing and

once you start doing something you are passionate about, then you will begin to live a more fulfilled life. Paying attention to the whisper is the most important thing you can do. By paying attention to what's going on, it can easily transform your life."

Abigail Santos holds a BA Honours in Communications Studies from McMaster and a Post Graduate Diploma in Broadcast Journalism from Seneca College. She enjoys the sights, tastes and sounds of downtown Hamilton where she lives.

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