Little **Big Voice**

Tanzania's President Jakaya Kikwete welcomes Oduwole

Oduwole with Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan

At 10 years old, Zuriel Oduwole is fluent in Mandarin, has interviewed Joyce Banda, Goodluck Jonathan and Aliko Dangote. She is two grades ahead at school and wants to be the president of the United States.

BY ABISOLA OWOLAWI

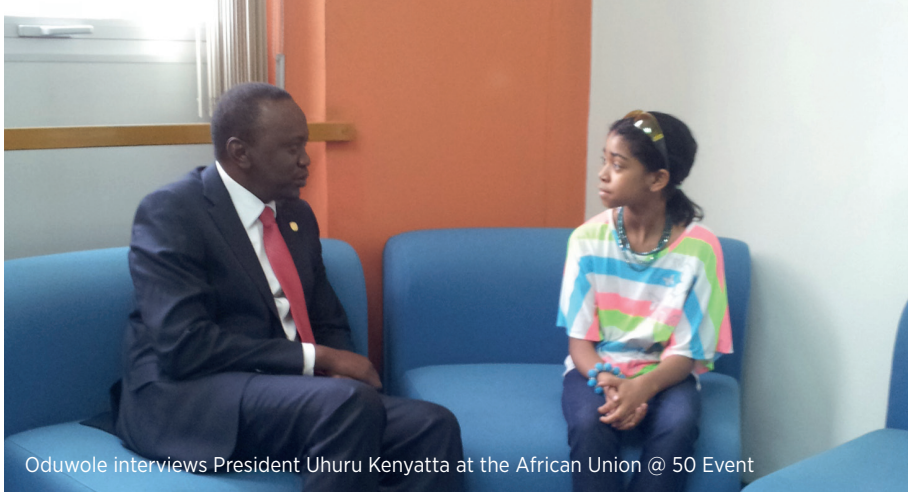
Oduwole and her sister with former Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and John Kufuor at the African Union

PHOTOS SUPPLIED

When she was nine, Zuriel Oduwole, who lived in Los Angeles, entered into a history competition that challenged students to make a short documentary on a revolution. As the youngest participant, Oduwole proved that age is nothing but a number.

This was more than just a competition for Oduwole. Of Nigerian-American heritage, she was born in Los Angeles in the summer of 2002, and had lived in Paris and Hong-Kong with her parents. She has been fascinated by Africa for as long as she can remember. This project was an opportunity to educate herself further and show why the continent had fascinated her so.

While Oduwole's sixth grade classmates planned projects that looked at California or the United States, she wanted to


Oduwole interviews President Uhuru Kenyatta at the African Union @ 50 Event

go further. With her parents' support, she chose Ghana as a country with a well-documented revolution. She traveled to the West African nation, where she interviewed two men who had ruled the country for many years—Presidents John Rawlings and John Kufuor.

Oduwole's documentary was given plaudits for originality.

Following the success of the project, a year later, the 10-year-old Oduwole started to make documentaries about African political and business leaders, who are making a difference in their countries.

She now has an impressive CV, which features interviews with some of Africa's most prominent figures—President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, President Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, business magnate Aliko Dangote and a few more.

"I like to do many things, like interview people to find out how they see things, especially presidents of countries, to find out what they are doing to help their citizens. I was excited to interview President Uhuru Kenyatta in May, because he is the newest elected African leader. I asked him questions like how he plans to bring his country together after a tough election, and how it feels being elected to a position his father [held] many years ago," says Oduwole.

Interviewing President Sirleaf was particularly meaningful to her, because she was the first female president in Africa.

"She encouraged me to study hard and to pursue my dreams, [she said] that I can be anything I want to be. President Joyce Banda of Malawi told me the same thing too, when I interviewed her last year."

She also enjoyed speaking to the president of Nigeria.

"His interview was unique because he laughed when I asked him how much good luck his name has brought to Nigeria, but he answered in detail, so that was very nice. He is really cool too, and I like his hat."

While it proved to be an exciting time for her, Oduwole's trips to Africa opened her eyes to many harsh realities, it spurred her interest to get more involved. She decided to cast her net wider by championing a program called "Dream Up! Speak Up! Stand Up!" with the help of the prestigious Lagos Business School and the US Consulate in Lagos, earlier this year.

"I am very interested in the girl child and the things they face in Africa. As you know, the girl child always gets [fewer] resources in Africa compared to the boy child and that is not fair. I spoke to students in some schools in Lagos about the need for the girls to dream big and speak loudly on important issues. I also wanted them to know that the girl child can do the same as the boy child, if she is given the opportunity to try. Girls are just as creative as boys," she says.

Oduwole has ambitions of becoming an athlete and competing at the Olympics. She has a flair for literature and would like to write children's adventure books. Unlike most girls her age, she has an interest in robotics.

"But when I get older, I want to be the president of the United States. When I say this, people say 'Why don't you want to be the president of an African country, where you are from?' Well, I tell them that I have to think smart. If I am the president of an African country, I might be able to affect my country, or maybe two countries. But if I am the president of the United States, I am going to be able to affect the United States, and many other countries in the world, especially in Africa. I have to [make] policies that help Africa and the United States too."

Oduwole, the oldest of four children, was home-schooled by her mother and other home-school teachers. She belongs to a private schooling system that enables students to attend events and projects outside of school, while preserving a traditional classroom interface. At 10 years old, she is in the seventh grade—two grades ahead of the average 10-year-old child in the United States.

She has visited more than a dozen countries and is fluent in English and Mandarin. She's currently working on developing her Nigerian languages, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Oduwole believes her travels and lessons provide an opportunity to represent Africa to her peers in the United States.

"I always tell my friends in school back in California that Africa is not bad at all, and there are some nice things there. Sometimes, they don't believe me when I say there are malls in Africa. So, with my documentaries, I hope to rebrand Africa by showing the rest of the world positive things about Africa," she says.

With all her activities on the continent, there is a bigger picture for Oduwole. She would like to see the children of Africa going to school rather than selling wares on the streets.

"They need an education so they can have good jobs when they get older, especially the girl child. I am really hoping that with the interviews I do with presidents, they would see that an African girl child like me is doing things that girls in their countries can do also."

Oduwole is doing her part and hopes that with her mission, she can be a big voice of change on the continent.