

A Leadership Journey begins in Providence, bringing students to Kenya, South Africa

Youth travel nonprofit aims to inspire young people to embrace global citizenship, ubuntu

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 20, 2020, 6:00 a.m.



Akeem Lloyd, founder and CEO of A

Leadership Journey JESS EVORA

The Boston Globe has launched a weekly Q&A with Rhode Island innovators who are starting new businesses and nonprofits, conducting

ground-breaking research, and reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to reporter Edward Fitzpatrick at edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com.

This week's Ocean State Innovators conversation is with [Akeem Lloyd](#), founder and chief executive officer of A Leadership Journey, a youth travel nonprofit based in Providence.

Question: How did A Leadership Journey start and what is its mission?

Answer: [A Leadership Journey](#) was built on equity, access, and mental health. We wanted to provide young people from vulnerable backgrounds with the opportunity to participate in youth-centered international cultural exploration. I was inspired by the idea of providing students with equal opportunity to learn about the world. After I came back from South Africa five years ago, I asked several people to help me create this platform for students, and they said yes. Our mission is to inspire young people to embody the essence of global citizenship, leadership, self-awareness, and ubuntu through cultural exploration. Students who begin to practice global citizenship will see the challenges of the entire world -- not just the ones here in America.

A: A Leadership Journey has taken students to South Africa twice and Kenya once. We have done this without grants or foundation support. Our village and community of individual donors and supporters have made this life-changing opportunity possible for students. We are now preparing and raising money for students to go to Ghana in 2020 and Kenya in 2021. We

know that travel is a vehicle for strengthening self-awareness, and conversations about self-awareness can lead to conversations about mental and emotional health. Whether it be PTSD or social/environmental traumatic experiences, a lot of young people are struggling with balancing their mental and emotional health. We also choose to emphasize international travel because we want to broaden our students' view of the world -- providing perspective and insight, allowing students to see the world through a different lens.

Q: What is ubuntu and how does A Leadership Journey nurture it in young people?

A: Ubuntu is an African proverb that means "I am because you are, my humanity is tied to yours." The essence of this proverb is saying: I am human, you are human, we are more alike than we are different. We practice ubuntu through empathy, understanding, and learning from each other. Students sit down with their peers from other countries and learn their stories, challenges, successes, and cultural norms. Through these conversations, students begin to understand just how connected they are, even though they live thousands of miles apart. They begin to see themselves in each other. This is a life lesson, a humanitarian lesson, and one that we believe will help our students operate in and within love whenever they are in different spaces. When you are able to see people as human first, you remove biases and stereotypes. We allow meaningful dialogue to teach us what we don't know.

Q: In your [TedxURI Talk](#), you recite a poem titled “Paintbrushes.” What is the point it makes about social responsibility?

A: The poem “Paintbrushes” conveys that all students are artists, and they have the opportunity to paint the world they wish to live in. And we, as adults, have this amazing opportunity and social responsibility to help our young people choose their colors -- to help our young people live in a better world, a safer world. Social responsibility is understanding that there is a young person who is also trying to get to where you are, and your mentorship and investment in that young person may be the reason why they get there.

Q: In your TedxURI Talk, you also mention a high school English teacher. What impact did he have on your life?

A: I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Atlantic City, N.J., where I had Mr. Reginald Kearney as a teacher in eighth, 10th and 12th grade. The impact he had on my life is that he never gave up on me. When I gave up on school, he never gave up on me. The same goes for other mentors I had. This is the ubuntu I speak of -- they saw themselves in me. This is the social responsibility I speak of -- they helped me choose my colors. When I was a senior in high school, I said to Mr. Kearney: I don’t know how I will ever be able to repay you. He said: In return, when you have the opportunity to do for others like I have done for you, just do it.

Q: Can you describe some of the challenges you faced in your educational journey?

A: I grew up with a speech impediment and couldn't read until second grade. In seventh grade, I started getting failing grades and gave up on school. I didn't push myself in high school, and when I got to college I learned just how much those decisions impacted me. At the Rutgers University-Camden campus, I struggled in a pre-college summer program and almost failed out. I realized I had the opportunity to break a cycle and be the first in my family to go to college. I passed the program, but then life happened. I had to lay my grandfather to rest my freshman year, and I was still struggling with my academic confidence and mental health. I received a 1.3 grade point average and was placed on probation. I called my track coach to inform him I was dropping out. He didn't let me. I am happy he didn't. I worked harder. And by the time I graduated, my GPA was 3.4. I graduated from Rutgers and then earned my master's degree in urban education from Temple University, focusing on youth development.