

UNITED WOMEN OF EAST AFRICA: Community is Family in Promoting Wellbeing and Preventing Sexual and Domestic Violence

ADVOCATE FEATURED

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United Women of East Africa (UWEAST) is a community-based organization in San Diego, California that serves and advocates alongside the East African refugee community. Led by community members of all genders, UWEAST provides culturally specific programming to family members across the life course. UWEAST staff have adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic while keeping the wellbeing of the youth and families they serve at the center of their mission. Through programming that honors the community's strong social, cultural, and spiritual ties, UWEAST helps young people in San Diego heal from experiences of violence and isolation, feel connected through courageous conversations, and uplift their collective voices to create a thriving community.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON YOUTH WELLBEING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION

UWEAST staff experienced firsthand the pandemic's negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of young people in San Diego's East African community. Closures of cultural and community spaces like schools, mosques, and recreation centers meant that young people were restricted in their activities and without the positive community resources



that enhance their success and wellbeing. Youth Coordinator Fardosa Osman shares that large gatherings and community prayer are important East African customs that were lost to temporary closures and distancing mandates. This new level of isolation across the community affected everyone differently. Osman and her colleagues noticed that many young people began struggling in school without access to their nurturing UWEAST programs and traditional school supports. Conversely, some young people gained newfound stability in remaining at home and saw improvement in their grades. Like many social inequities, negative impacts have been compounded for the young people whose families experience structural barriers such as a lack of economic opportunity and language barriers that make navigating social services difficult. Substance misuse, violence, and online harassment increased during the pandemic. UWEAST staff and adults in the community became worried about harm hidden online as youth sheltering in place turned to social media to remain connected. Mohamed Musse, another Youth Coordinator at UWEAST who works closely with boys and young men said that many young community members expressed anxiety and feelings of depression from being unable to gather with friends or play sports like they used to. Despite the challenges of being apart, Fardosa points to a silver lining for UWEAST: "we got to learn so much about our community, our impact in our community, and how important it is to stay

connected despite the fact that we can't be together in person." Connection has been the foundation for UWEAST's programming and their guiding principle for preventing violence and promoting healing in an ever-changing community context.

HOLISTIC, COMMUNITY-BASED, AND CULTURALLY ROOTED PROGRAMMING FOR WELLBEING ACROSS GENERATIONS

Before the pandemic and now, UWEAST tailors their programming to meet the ever-shifting needs and preferences of young people in the San Diego East African community. The organization's staff is uniquely situated because they are their program participants' close peers and family members, as well as resource providers for their community. Fardosa explains that her team's familiarity with community members helps them explore trauma and healing while balancing the challenges of stigma. UWEAST purposely hires staff across generations to have team members who understand the relationships and struggles of both youth and adults. Supporting entire families across the lifespan strengthens young people's ability to thrive. Their culturally rooted programming meets the specific needs of every generation in the community, from support groups for mothers and health insurance navigation for elders to





weekend outings for youth and young adults. Fardosa and Mohamed stress the importance of creating safe, trusting spaces for young people. Programs are developed by surveying young people about their passions and creating events that allow them to explore these passions while also safely connecting on challenging topics like stigma surrounding mental health issues and violence. Young men come together in UWEAST's basketball league to build trust and brotherhood while overcoming the effects of isolation and distancing. Pregame motivational talks support bringing on-court teamwork and confidence into everyday experiences in their community. Healing circles are a staple for UWEAST and a way to bring groups of young people together for courageous discussions where they explore pressing topics, forging a deeper connection to themselves, one another, and their community. Fardosa, Mohamed, and their team hold healing circles at UWEAST's facility as well as community gathering places link beach bonfires to discuss suicidality, domestic violence, and other topics affecting community members and promote self-love. Leaders at UWEAST are careful to make healing spaces a place for open dialogue without retraumatizing young people who may be experiencing violence or mental health difficulties. This delicate balance of healing without re-harming is made easier by how deeply rooted coordinators like Fardosa and

Mohamed are in the lives of those they serve, love, and care for.

"Community is family": promoting safe and healthy relationships across the entire community

UWEAST's approach to preventing violence and improving mental health in the lives of East African youth in San Diego shows the importance of tailoring prevention strategies to the assets and needs of a community. Fardosa, Mohamed, and their team have fostered trust, connection, and healing that have withstood the isolation and violence resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. All the services that UWEAST provides to their community are centered in a concept that Fardosa summarizes perfectly: "community is family." This outlook means that UWEAST staff is not only working to improve wellbeing for young people, but also to lay the foundation for safer and healthier relationships across their entire community. Mohamed grounds his work in the promise to create opportunities for young people that were not there for him and other adults in the community. UWEAST's deeply personal connections to their community shines through in all their programming and serves as a testament to the value of holistic, culturally rooted violence prevention and wellbeing strategies.

ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHY

Fardosa Osman is a long-time resident of City Heights; a community known for its rich and vibrant immigrant and refugee communities. She is a graduate of San Francisco State University, where she studied Psychology. Fardosa has spent most of her life serving the local Somali community. She values her intersectionality as a Black Muslim Woman from a refugee and immigrant community. She works hard to create equitable, resourceful, and accessible spaces in her surrounding communities to empower herself and those around her. She works at United Women of East Africa (UWEAST) as a Youth Coordinator where she develops and implements the programs that serve the needs of East African youth. In the future, Fardosa plans to develop projects that address the dilemma of refugee intergenerational trauma that impacts the new generation of East African Americans.

Mohamed Musse is a youth coordinator at United Women of East Africa, an organization located in City Heights San Diego with a goal at becoming the pipeline to culturally competent health services, education and advocacy for the improvement of east African women and their families' health and wellbeing. He holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and is currently working on master's degree at San Diego State University.