

She has a Dream

Kutlwano Shai Addresses Young Black Women's Inner & Outer Beauty

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Kutlwano "Kay" Nkanwiso Shai (11), founder of Young Black Belleza. Photo by Elijah Montano

Kutlwano "Kay" Nkanwiso Shai (11) was sitting on her bed when she had a thought. "What would happen if I started my own organization to help other people?" She proceeded to FaceTime her friend, Ntsako Hlaneke, a South African foreign exchange student currently studying in North Carolina. "So, Ding! Ding! Ding!" Kay said excitedly to her friend. "I have an idea!" Of course, after Kay explained her idea, Ntsako responded with support. So, Kay grabbed a scrapbook and paper, and asked her friend to help think of a name for the organization. "To be honest, it took me thirty minutes [to come up with a name for my organization]," Kay later told The Bear Truth.

Kay is the founder of Young Black Belleza, an organization (or platform, as referred to by its founder) dedicated to embracing the inner and outer beauty of people of color, especially young black women. "Belleza" means beauty in Spanish, while the "za" in the word coincidentally stands for "South Africa," in context of the name. Kay herself is a problack foreign exchange student, aspiring author, and aspiring pediatrician from South Africa. "[Being in America] made me realize the significance of my blackness in a different country." She hopes to be partnered with other people by the time she moves back to South Africa in June 2019. For now, Kay refers to Young Black Belleza as a platform because "I want people to know about it. Generally, I want it to become an [official] organization."

"Life is changing," said Kay. "I have only been here for four months, and my life has changed in a very special but peculiar way. When I came here, I knew that it was going to be different. It was like starting a whole new life in a whole new area." It is no secret that Palmer Ridge is not very diverse, with only 206 of the 1181 students in the 2017-2018 school year having some degree of non-white heritage. Kay noticed on her first day. "I felt like I was the only black girl in the school. I didn't see any other race besides white people." Yet, Kay was surprised by the reaction from many students. "A lot of people came up to me and were like 'You're so pretty. You're so beautiful. You shine. You look amazing.' And I was like 'What?! Don't say that!' I did not think that people would take my ethnicity and think that it's so gorgeous. Sometimes you underestimate the type of person you are and where you come from. I underestimated my blackness . . . [People] were fascinated about my hair. They were fascinated about how I did things. I was excited about it. It was weird the first time. I was like 'Guys stop asking me about my hair. It's just hair. The same way you do your hair, I do my hair.' I got to realize that the things I would take lightly, like my hair, my skin color, are things that mean a lot to other people. [They] are things that interest other people."

"We underestimate our beauty as people, in general, especially as teenagers," said Kay. "Coming from South Africa, a lot of people do underestimate themselves. Using my experiences in America, I'll try and encourage other people to have confidence in their race, and the people that they are born and raised to be . . . For me, it took a whole country and different people to actually convince me I'm

beautiful and I'm black and I'm bold."

Currently, Young Black Belleza is based on Instagram with the account @young_black_belleza, which created its first post on November 16, 2018. "You don't need to be black to be part of the movement," said Kay. "That's why on the Instagram page, I have different people that tell me what beauty is to them, and what black beauty is to them . . . beauty, as in not physically. Beauty on a spiritual level. Beauty on an emotional level. Beauty in general. It's mostly about self-care as a person." On the Instagram page, Kay features black-and-white photos of different students with their respective quotes of their definitions of beauty. One such post includes a photo of a young South African student named Kamohelo Mashiloane, along with her quote, "Black beauty is the epitome of magic. My fairy godmother is a phenomenal woman defined by her color. She waved her wand, sang and danced like Africa and she made magic." As of December 11, Young Black Belleza's Instagram account has featured PRHS students Mary Dunston (11), Alexa Buckaloo (11), Chiara Gemkow (11), and Talyn Atkins (11).

Kay has a hopeful future planned for herself and Young Black Belleza. "This is my dream. Having youth summits where I tell young girls out there about my experience in America and help them change their lives. Having events where I give away healthcare products for young girls out there for self-care . . . [Walking and running events] for young girls. Donations for girls who don't have anything." Kay has a passion for writing, to a point where she regularly journals. "I am going to try to write a book about my experiences and the things I've done in America. I am going to use that [book] to help people out there. It is going to be like a study guide to teenagehood. This Young Black Belleza thing will be included in the book."

She already has a project planned for the organization. "In South Africa, [women] don't get pads [for menstruation] for free . . . there are communities that are poor." According to Kay, when a teenage girl from a low-income South African community is undergoing menstruation, the girl is unable to go to school as she is unable to afford pads. This takes a toll on the education of these low-income teenage girls, as it is a "natural thing that occurs every month." By contrast, while both pads and condoms require purchase in the United States, condoms are free in South Africa. "Pads are supposed to be free too," said Kay. "It's a basic need of any girl in any place in the world." Kay plans to create fundraising events where people can also donate pads for these girls.

"The reason why I have people post pictures of themselves with their quotes is for people to understand what beauty is. Beauty is not, 'You are beautiful. I like your skin.' As I said, it's on an emotional, spiritual, and [for] some people, it's on a physical level. My vision is to see myself one day giving to someone without [her] even asking me," said Kay.

Students can become a part of Young Black Belleza by reaching out to the Instagram page @young_black_belleza, youngblackbelleza.wordpress.com, or Kutlwano "Kay" Nkanwiso Shai.