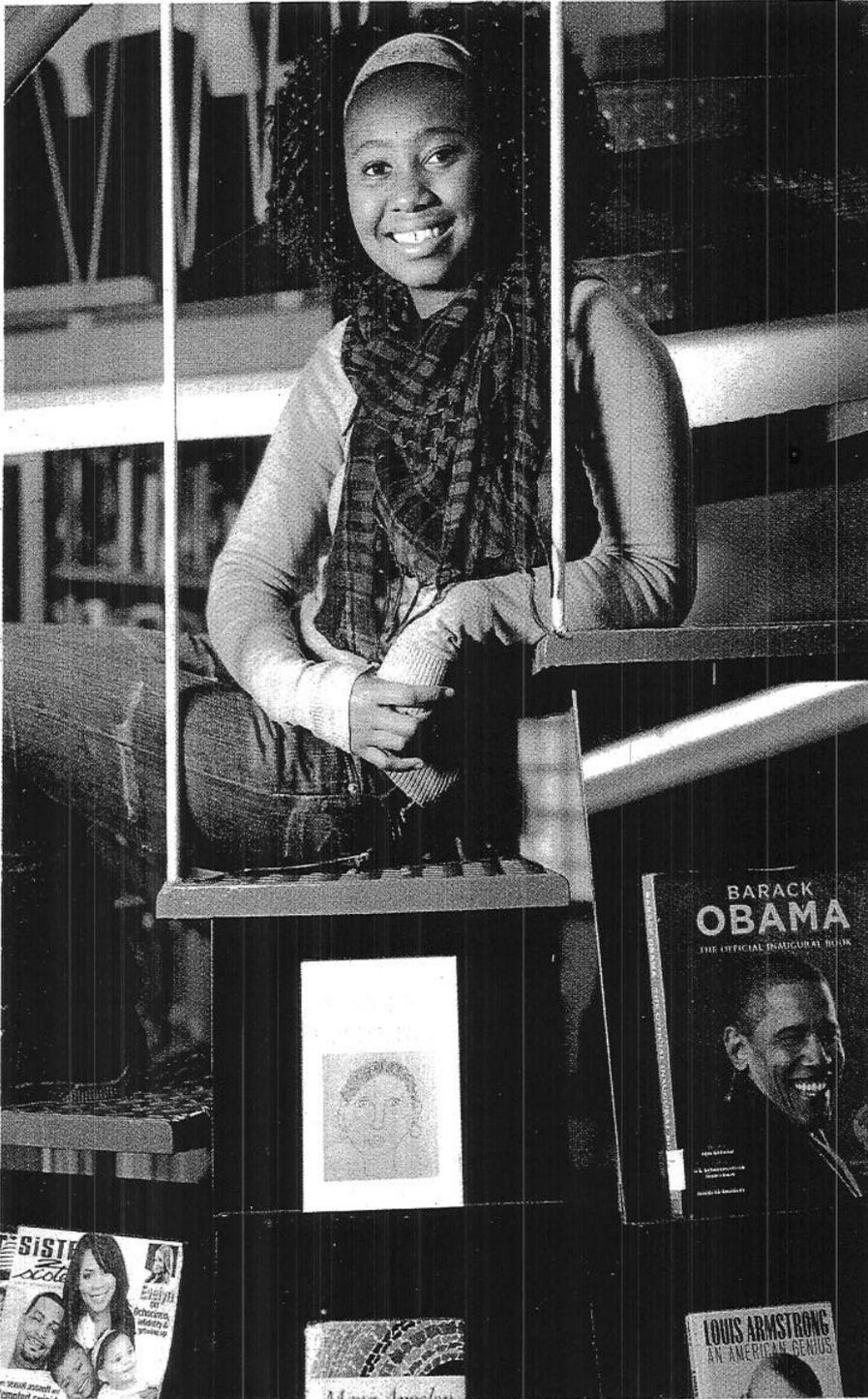


THE GIRL WHO INSPIRED MICHELLE OBAMA

It's easy to see why Annah Tseko made such an impression on the US first lady – she's compassionate, wise and determined to make SA a better place



Annah Tseko at the Rosa Parks library in Soweto, which also houses Global Girl Media, an NGO she works with that teaches young girls about broadcasting and digital media.

IT'S not often that a teenage girl gets to be recognised above the millions of others clamouring for attention. But somehow young Annah Tseko of Soweto has become the talk of the town – and the world – after she was singled out by US first lady Michelle Obama for being an inspiration in her life.

With these words, broadcast from the White House in America recently, Obama hailed the ambitious teenager as a role model for all the world to see: "Annah is an 18-year-old South African who produces hard-hitting stories on issues such as climate change and HIV... Everywhere I've gone during my time as first lady, I have been inspired by people like Annah."

The words captivated people everywhere as the story of the young township volunteer and writer went viral on Twitter and sent ripples of pride through every South African's body. It was one of those moments where the right person said the right thing about the most deserving person. Soon everyone wanted to know about Annah and it became clear that her drive to build her community is one of the things that brought the first lady to South Africa on her maiden major tour without her husband, US President Barack Obama. And the young woman is duly humbled by all the attention and the opportunity to meet Michelle.

"Wow! It was just awesome," gushes the fresh-faced Annah when we meet her at the Rosa Parks library in Soweto. "Mrs Obama is just so normal and warm – I swear she was just like a real South African."

It's this ability to be real and to connect with and inspire ordinary people that has left such an impression on South Africans. It's also this ability that is now being identified as the reason Mrs Obama is called the president's "secret weapon" – with or without her husband, she is a force to be reckoned with. Which is what made Annah's meeting with her at the Young Leaders Forum in Joburg all the more powerful.

"We posed in stilettos for 30 minutes while waiting for her to arrive," Annah says. "But as soon as she appeared I couldn't believe that it was her, right there with us! She's tall and beautiful, her skin is soft and meeting her was incredible... She is a



MichelleNews Michelle Obama News
Video: Meet Annah Tseko <http://su.pr/2NQGj1>
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“Mrs Obama is just so normal and warm – I swear she was just like a real South African”



happy, spirited person. If it weren't for the tight security around her, you would swear that she's an ordinary South African."

SO WHAT is it about Annah that made her so appealing to the first lady of the United States of America? Not much, Annah would say, since the humble young woman is not your typical teen. After matriculating from Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto last year, she enrolled at Tshwane University of Technology to study building science. But due to space constraints she'll start her course only next year.

In the meantime Annah volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club of South Africa, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that aims to positively affect the lives of South African children. "We help young kids with their homework. It's an afternoon programme so we also play games and have fun to keep kids off the streets," explains the young woman who lives with her proud parents, Beauty and Gilbert.

But that's not all she does – she also volunteers at the Soweto Old Age Home where she does everything from washing dishes and sprucing up the place to ensuring that the gogos live in a clean environment.

"I don't know my grandparents and volunteering at the old-age home affords me time with grandparents that I can get to know," she says with a smile.

But the reason she has become so well known is that she also works with Global Girl Media, an international NGO that teaches young women across the world about broadcasting and digital media.

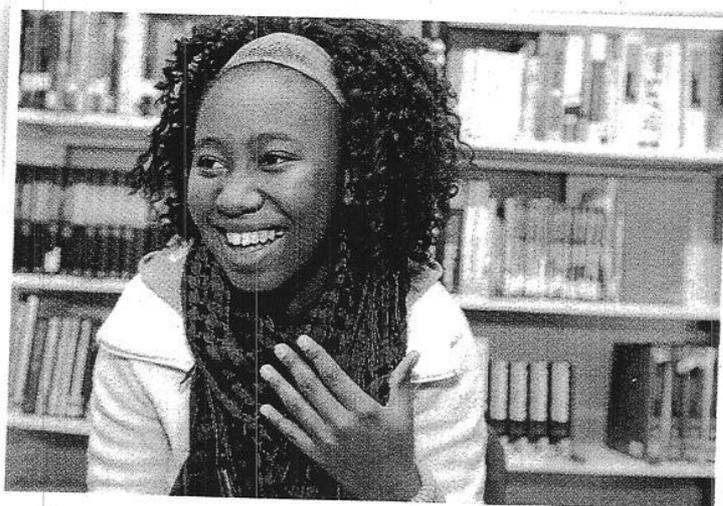
"We also select HIV-positive girls between 15 and 22 and teach them to be journalists

by giving them a camera and letting them write their own stories. This is called citizen journalism: ordinary people telling their stories in the media. We aim to give these young women louder voices, using digital media to make sure that the world becomes a better place," she says.

It is her work with Global Girl Media that put Annah on the path where she would meet Michelle Obama. Annah and her colleagues often have video conferences, which allow them to communicate with the US embassy, the NGO's head office in the US and all its programmes around the world.

"Working with Global Girl Media has helped me with my self-esteem. I was a very shy person and would never stand in front of or behind the camera because I was afraid of being judged. But today I go out there and am able to interview people and tell the stories of our communities," she

ABOVE: Outspoken Annah was happy to meet the US first lady and Michelle was impressed by the young girl's work. **RIGHT:** Bubbly Annah is not afraid to speak her mind and is determined to be a successful South African.



says. "This has helped me become more talkative and outspoken, and I think that's why I was chosen to meet Michelle."

WHILE she has been hailed as an inspiration to Michelle Obama, Annah says her seamstress mother, Beauty, is her own inspiration. "She's there to talk to me about anything a girl needs to speak to a mother about. My mother fears that I'll come home with a bulging tummy. When she realised that I had a boyfriend, she sat me down and we talked about boys and life in general. I told her there's no reason to be concerned. I want to be successful and I am going to be successful," she says with determination.

Annah, who describes herself as "a natural girl with simple taste" credits her welder father with her drive to succeed. "It hurts me to see him bending in the cold making steel gates and enduring the summer heat to make an income so that we don't go to bed hungry," she says.

"My family believes in me and my late boyfriend also believed in me. He always told me that good things are coming my way . . ." she drifts off. Her boyfriend died tragically in a car accident last year, but she seems to be coping.

"I shared everything with him . . . But I always remember what he said about good things coming my way and that encourages me to do better with each passing day."

She says she wants to be a good example to her younger sister, Mary (8), and her 26-year-old brother, Mandla, who is deaf. And although she has never been to the United States, she wishes she could visit the Obamas in the US.

With her drive, determination, leadership skills and compassion, we're sure The White House will welcome her with open arms . . . Watch this space! □

thembisile@drum.co.za