

I am an American We are One Nation

HEALING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ART

Mawia Elawad works to help city's residents express fears and hopes

SARAH TADDEO

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Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.



Mawia Elawad, 21, immigrated to the U.S. from Sudan and is a student at Alfred University in Rochester, N.Y., working with Art Force 5, a group that creates communal art projects.

OLIVIA LOPEZ/USA TODAY NETWORK

Mawia Elawad

Location: Rochester, New York **Age:** 21 **Profession:** College student, member of Art Force 5 **Mission:** To facilitate community conversations around hotbed issues through communal art.

For Mawia Elawad, a conversation between a neighborhood resident and a police officer while helping paint a community mural would make her work worth it.

Elawad, a 21-year-old Alfred University senior from Rochester, New York, is part of Art Force 5, a student group providing an outlet for residents to express their emotions through communal art projects that touch major U.S. issues like poverty, race and police-community relations.

"We're giving people the chance to have their voices heard," she said, adding that the projects are focused on "messages that help (community members) highlight their own self-esteem and realize the strength they have within themselves."

The projects often include tiles that community members can paint to form larger murals, to be displayed at community events or exhibits to demonstrate peaceful unity.

The group did another project where community members could hang black or blue ribbons, to memorialize both the black lives and the police lives lost.

Art Force 5 started as an outreach program related to an Alfred University class called “Drawn to Diversity.” Students hold workshops for elementary school children, acting as “superheroes” to show that anyone can be a “hero” and deliver powerful community messages.

At a Black Lives Matter rally in Rochester last year, Art Force 5 offered boards with the words, “Why” and “What Now?,” where residents could jot down their thoughts. The group showed the boards to Rochester police officers after the rally to continue the discussion about community-police relations.

Elawad and Dan Napolitano, Alfred’s director of student activities who heads the Drawn to Diversity class, are working together to seek grants to start an Art Force 5 team in New York City.

Q&A WITH MAWIA ELAWAD

Mawia Elawad of Rochester, New York, attends Alfred University and is an integral member of Art Force 5, a small group of students working to facilitate conversations about race, poverty and social justice through community art. She was born in Sudan, came to the U.S. as a child and found that community service and justice efforts have helped her discover her cultural identity as an immigrant and an American.

What does it mean to be an American?

“To be an American means to be someone that understands privilege but doesn’t shy away from it. Being an American means taking all the different cultures and ways of life that we experience, and saying, ‘How do I fit into that?’ ”

What moment touched and motivated you to take part in this effort?

“When I did my first classroom visit, it was to a thirdgrade classroom. I liked that we engaged the kids, and it was refreshing and humbling to see them having fun and learning at the same time. We get to be a part of that process and growth, and that’s the larger part of the picture in what we try to do with Art Force 5.”

What gives you hope and what concerns you?

“The one thing that concerns me is the fact that people are so quick to neglect the other pieces of other cultures that they have within them, and only embrace what they see through tunnel vision. Programs like Art Force 5 and the work that other community members do are what give me hope. It only takes that 1 percent, one degree, to change someone’s mind.”

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

“What we hope to get on a personal level is our own growth and development, but also knowing that we empowered one person through one interaction to maybe do something different that day, or in the long run to learn something different about themselves.”

— *Sarah Taddeo*