Never say no to Apefa Adjivan because for this college student, no always means yes.

She heard it from her high school counselors when she wanted to go to the University of Toronto. No–girls like her would never get in.

She heard it from other teenage girls like herself who were told to give up on their goals. No–you can't do that because of who you are.

She heard it first from her Aunt when 5-year-old Apefa told her that she wanted to be a doctor. No–girls who looked like her, from her background, don't become doctors.

“As a young black woman, I have been told countless times that I cannot accomplish my goals,” says Apefa. “However, this moment was one of the most impactful in that respect, and I believe one of the earliest memories I have of being told that my race meant that my future was limited.”

Apefa Adjivon was born in a refugee camp in Ghana, Africa. When she was 4, her family moved to Canada into a low-income community where everyone struggled just to get by.

“My parents could not continue to pursue their prior careers in Canada, and for some time, we lived in public housing and my parents both took on numerous odd jobs to make ends meet.”

Eventually, through her parents’ hard work and determination, the family was able to afford a more comfortable, middle class lifestyle. And although Aperfa’s childhood was happy, her family clung to its Ghanian ways, which meant that girls do not go to school. In that environment, Aperfa became aware of issues facing girls, not just in developing countries, but in the West as well.

It all came to a head during her first year in college when Aperfa had a conversation with a group of high school students. They were angry because their teacher had discouraged them from applying to their first choice university.
“Their skills and potential were negatively being assumed because they were black women,” says Aperfa. “Meeting them made me think of myself and my upbringing. The knowledge that young women today are going through the same things I went through, and still being told the same negative, limiting rhetoric, angered me.” But Aperfa didn’t just get angry, she got motivated.

“That frustration turned into my speaking more boldly and openly about women’s rights issues, particularly the struggles of young black women. The more I talked about it, the more I got engaged in efforts to support youth and girls of color, and unexpectedly and unintentionally got very engaged in social change.”

Through a fellowship with the Resolution Project that recognizes and helps support socially responsible young leaders, Aperfa was able to put her vision into action. She founded The Pearl Project, an after-school program for girls from a low-income Toronto community.

“Understanding that my experiences are not unique to me but, in fact, are a common barrier other young people and young racialized women face is the baseline for my work,” says Aperfa.

Using space provided by the local government, The Pearl Project pairs girls with mentors and career counselors, based on similarities in cultural and racial identity, as well as interests, with the mission of inspiring and empowering the girls to reach their own goals.

“Do not let the fact that you are young or inexperienced stop you from pursuing your passions,” says Aperfa. “Everyone who has ever done anything has been a beginner at some point. You cannot be an expert or be a leader, or be whatever you want to be without starting first!”

But Aperfa admits that changing minds is not going to happen overnight. Despite the many accomplishments she has had in advocating for the right of girls to ignore the naysayers in their lives, she says she is still regularly discouraged from pursuing her work and her own future goals. “Implicit racism, sexism, and ageism continue to be the biggest barriers I face as I work to advocate against them.”

Aperfa says she is adamant that age, gender, race or any other factor should not stand in the way of young people who are ready to invest their talent and energy in pursuit of new ideas and lofty goals.

“The more I work in this field and speak to other young people about their dreams and visions for the world and for their communities, the more I believe that I can, and that young people as a whole can make a change!

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Aperfa is currently studying International Relations and Women’s Studies at the University of Toronto. She has been named one of Canada’s top 30 under 30 in Sustainability, North America’s Top 22 Under 22 Most Inspiring Collegiate Women, A Young Leader Building Peace by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, one of the Top 150 Canadians by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, a young woman in leadership by the City of Toronto, and most recently a Forbes Fellow for her inspiring leadership and actions within her field.