

comment

An engineer's infectious passion



SUPPLIED IMAGE/ BRANDON COOPER REALTICS

RUSSELL THOMAS
Community Impact
United Way of Fort McMurray

I first saw D'Andre Wilson-Ihejirika at the Heart of Wood Buffalo Awards a number of years ago. That year, she was the recipient of the Newcomer Engagement Award. I didn't get the chance to meet her that night, but I remember getting this overwhelmingly positive feeling about the impact she was making in our community, after having only arrived earlier that year. That feeling was reinforced when she stepped forward to volunteer as one of our 100 Faces of United Way.

D'Andre is working at Sun-cor as a process safety engineer. In her free time she volunteers with the BrainSTEM Alliance, an organization she founded, and the Wood Buffalo Regional Science Fair. She is passionate about science, technology, engineering and math - the words behind STEM - and during our 30 minute interview on the IMPACT radio program, she



SUPPLIED IMAGE
BRANDON COOPER REALTICS

even had me excited. Science, technology, engineering and math are subjects that I normally avoid, but she drew me in, probably in the same way she has drawn in many young people since she arrived in Fort McMurray.

Originally from Bahamas, D'Andre was raised in Nassau by parents who were both accountants. Their commitment to giving back obviously had an influence.

"My parents have always been involved in the com-

munity," she said. "Dad was involved in sports, particularly the Bahamas Basketball Federation, as a youth coach. Mom volunteered with the church and was active in women's rights groups. My siblings and I were always very involved in extracurricular activities."

D'Andre attended university in Canada, first at McGill, then at the University of Toronto where she pursued her masters. "While at the U of T, I got involved with the National Society of Black Engineers," she shared. "One of their mandates was to give back by encouraging youth to pursue engineering." That experience planted the seeds for what grew into the BrainSTEM Alliance in Fort McMurray. The nonprofit focuses on exposing youth to the many disciplines of engineering. The "Alliance" portion of their name celebrates the fact that they do all of their programming in partnership with other organizations. An example of a successful program is Operation Smart, funded by United Way

in partnership with Girls Inc. of Northern Alberta. "The programs gives young girls an introduction to science and engineering," she said. "Every time we start, we get the girls to draw what they think an engineer looks like and identify three words to describe an engineer. Most of them don't really know what engineers do and have this narrow view of what an engineer looks like."

The eight-week program introduces them to a new engineering discipline each week. Female volunteers, with different engineering specialise and passion.

"At the end of the program, when they say to you that 'I want to be an engineer', there is quite a feeling of accomplishment," said D'Andre.

As an avid volunteer with the Wood Buffalo Regional Science Fair, she gets to see the results of her efforts with the BrainSTEM Alliance. "It always makes me so happy to see girls from the Girls Inc. Operation Smart program at the science fair because that

means they took what they learned, went back to school, won their school science fair and advanced to the regional science fair."

D'Andre's eyes light up when she talks about the work that she is doing, both on site and in the community. Her zest for science is infectious, and has impacted youth through programs run by the Wood Buffalo Regional Library, Fort McMurray Boys and Girls Club, Justin Slade Youth Foundation and Girls Inc.

"I'm really happy that I can give them that exposure so they can explore that opportunity," she said. "And some of them can recognize that they actually love it (science), as opposed to ignoring it all together." "What is an engineer?" I asked.

"An engineer is someone who solves problems," she answered. Engineers love asking 'why' questions. Why does this happen like this? Why does it work like this? D'Andre seems to have a firm grasp on why she loves engineering

and is doing everything possible to give young people a glimpse into it as a possible career path. Her passion and the model of the BrainSTEM Alliance is spreading, first to a colleague in High River, who read about it in an engineering publication, then to connections in Regina and Sarina.

"It's a great way to expose youth to science, technology, engineering and math," she said. "Giving engineers that outlet to give back, giving them a network to work with to come up with new, fun, innovative ideas and helping them to reach out to youth is what this organization is all about."

In addition to being one of our 100 Faces of United Way, D'Andre was our guest on IMPACT back in July

...
IMPACT is a weekly radio show heard on 91.1 The Bridge and hosted by Russell Thomas. It can also be seen on Shaw Cable 10 and on the Shaw TV Fort McMurray Youtube channel.