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The extraordinary journey of Montreal-born actor Ayisha Issa, Batshaw ambassador

Being in a group home “is not the end — this does not define who they are,” the Montreal native tells youth. She speaks from personal experience.

Susan Schwartz • Montreal Gazette

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Being in a group home "was the first big turning point in my life," actor Ayisha Issa says. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /Postmedia

Montreal native Ayisha Issa, an award-winning television and film actor, has been named the first ambassador to Montreal's Batshaw Youth and Family Centres Foundation.

When she was 15, Issa lived for several months in a group home run by Batshaw Youth and Family Centres, a Montreal-based agency providing protection and other services to youth in difficulty. Now 39, she describes herself as having been "a very troubled teenager."

She struggled with dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder "and school was a huge source of pain for me," she recalled. Anxiety and self-esteem were issues, "and rolled into that were body issues and eating disorders."

"I was self-medicating with smoking and drinking and hanging out with people I should not have been hanging out with. I put myself in dangerous situations.

“My mom recognized, more so than I did, that I was very close to falling off in a way that I was not going to recover from.”

So as Issa continued to attend high school, she lived for several months in the structured environment of a Batshaw group home in Montreal’s west end.

“My mom made that decision — but she made it for us,” she said. “She realized that she needed help ... and that our relationship could be causing more harm than good. My dad was not around for my sister and me, my mom was a single mom and we had our differences.

“At first, I felt betrayed and angry. But quite quickly, I started to settle and to take in a lot of the tools they were giving me to cope and to feel the support that was available to me,” she said. “The workers were solid and consistent and level-headed ... you could talk to them and they would listen.

“Care helped me out of that negative spiral — the one that can create a self-fulfilling prophecy,” said Issa. “That was the first big turning point in my life.”

After several months, “I went back home with my mother and sister — and things were better. I think we both needed space and to get our own footing.”

Issa’s “extraordinary journey, commitment, perseverance and vision make her a uniquely qualified advocate for at-risk youth,” Batshaw Foundation executive director Wendy Khan said.



“The workers were solid and consistent and level-headed ... you could talk to them and they would listen,” Ayisha Issa says of her time at a group home. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /PNG

Issa describes herself as someone who understands from experience the importance of nurturing and empowering youth in care and children at risk. She sits on Batshaw’s youth advisory council and interacts directly with youth in care.

“You build relationships with them and they share their goals and dreams,” she said.

“I sit and tell my story and how I felt when I was their age and try to remind them that this is not the end — that this does not define who they are,” she said in an interview from Vancouver, where she moved during the pandemic and recently purchased a two-storey loft in the city’s Gastown neighbourhood.

“As ambassador, I would like to tell vulnerable youth that hope and resilience, combined with the right support, can change lives,” said Issa, who has volunteered with Batshaw since her early 20s. “I am living proof that bright and promising futures are real possibilities.”

After graduating from MIND High School, Issa enrolled in programs including fashion design, interior design and esthetics — her mother has owned and operated an esthetics business for years — but didn't complete any.

"I just struggled," she recalled. "I had an atypical brain and the system is not geared for that."

Forays into modelling were disappointing. "I was just getting beat up by the modelling industry for not fitting a standard."

But by taking up Brazilian jiu-jitsu, "I recognized the power and positive things my body could do; I started feeling good about my athletic body."

Someone she knew suggested that she audition for a Hollywood movie to be shot in Montreal — *Immortals*, a 2011 fantasy action film whose stars included Henry Cavill, Freida Pinto and Mickey Rourke.

"Me not knowing what I didn't know allowed me to just enjoy it — and I ended up booking the role," she recalled. She played High Priestess #4.

"From there, it just snowballed."

Issa went on to roles in several television shows and films, and voice and stunt roles in video games. In 2018 she earned a Prix Gémeaux for her portrayal of Brittany (Bouba) Sizzla in the acclaimed Radio-Canada drama *Unité 9*, set in a Quebec women's prison. Her character, a troubled prisoner, had been trafficked.

"It's not a joke. It happens constantly — and insidiously," said Issa. "I was 13 and 14 and people 19 and 20 were showing interest and I thought that was somehow a positive thing. I was at super-high risk of being trafficked."

"Through my character in *Unité 9*, I was processing a lot of my own trauma and I realized how close I had been to really being that person," Issa said.

In the 2022 Canadian Screen Awards, Issa won best supporting actress in a drama for her role as Dr. June Curtis on the hit series *Transplant*. The fourth and final season of the CTV medical drama, filmed in Montreal, wrapped in November.

Dating an architect for a time introduced Issa to the world of design and architecture “and I felt inspired,” she said.

Completing formal education “was on my bucket list” and she is enrolled in an interior design program at Montreal’s LaSalle College, doing classes and assignments online and is set to graduate by next fall.

“This will give me some sense of security to have something in my back pocket,” Issa said. “And I’m pitching a show about me going back to school and exploring interior design and architecture.”

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