

Making a Difference Where I Stand

As a “non-traditional” college student, I often have a fairly different perspective on my learning experiences than do my peers. I have worked in the same profession for more than 20 years and currently hold a full-time job; I am married; I have four children who range in age from 21 to 14, all of them living at home; my oldest attends Utah Valley University (UVU) with me; and my husband is busy with his own career. It’s a very different life from your “average” college student and that is why I belong to the category of non-traditional students.

At UVU, though, about 30 per cent of our student body is non-traditional in some respect. We have attendees who come from all over the United States; a significant portion of our students are older than the 25 years age bracket of traditional college students; and our female students outnumber males. So, what makes me unique amongst all this variety?

In my work as a paralegal over the past 23 years, I have developed a strong sense of advocacy for the underdog; the person in need; the person who struggles with or faces difficult circumstances. My purpose in returning to school is to obtain a law degree so I can more fully advocate for and assist those in need. But I have found many opportunities to do just that with my fellow students during my schooling. One recent opportunity came from my involvement in an engaged learning experience at UVU, which has been a focus of the University’s academic curriculum since 2008. As a part of this approach, students are encouraged to participate in activities which allow them to implement the knowledge they are gaining. Teams of students work together and rely on the help of faculty advisors for advice only when students can’t resolve issues on their own. In these situations, non-traditional students like me have a greater opportunity to contribute to student-led team efforts using our personal and professional experiences to accomplish such projects successfully.

On October 2, 2017, the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF) – a group of student clubs at UVU – hosted a round table discussion featuring speakers with expertise in sustainable mountain development (SMD), which is a global focus of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The roundtable discussion addressed issues faced by women living in mountainous regions around the world, as these populations and regions are often the most vulnerable to climate change, environmental problems, and other challenges of development.

For several years, UIMF members have been involved in advocating within the State of Utah, throughout North America, and at the United Nations for the causes of mountain women.

This advocacy has been accomplished, in part, by hosting four international Women of the Mountains Conferences since 2007, with these conferences having become one of the major forums in North America to address gender and other SMD concerns of the United Nations. UIMF's next step in this effort will be to report about the causes of mountain women at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in March 2018.

As part of the UIMF team arranging the roundtable discussion, I worked with other students to organize the event, greeted the visiting speakers, presented a brief biographical introduction for one of the guests, and then had the opportunity to accompany the speakers to a luncheon where we discussed ongoing issues relating to sustainable development.

Among the five speakers featured at the round table, I was most impressed with the presentation by Ms. Wendy Jyang, founder and president of an international NGO focused on humanitarian issues, students, and families.

Ms. Jyang is from Taiwan and was an international student attending Brigham Young University when she got involved with the United Nations. Because of the extreme poverty existing in her home country, she desired to take some action that might help to unite families and empower them to overcome the conditions in which they lived. To achieve this, Ms. Jyang founded an NGO which brings youth volunteers to China from around the world, so they can interact with and assist impoverished and refugee families. This organization, the Utah China Friendship Improvement Sharing Hands Development and Commerce (FISHD&C), is a partner of the United Nations, and was recognized by its Economic and Social Council with a grant of special consultative status in 2015.

As I listened to Ms. Jyang speak and considered the impactful work she has undertaken, I wondered how I could make such a difference. The prospect felt quite overwhelming as I thought about the work involved in establishing an organization such as hers, and I considered how I could have an impact on others when I already have significant demands on my time and resources. But then I reviewed things I have already done during these past three years of school. I have participated in study sessions with fellow students, so we could master difficult course material. I have volunteered to be a note-taker for classmates needing special assistance in their educational process. I spend time discussing with and tutoring peers struggling with the subject matter of a course. I speak up in class and offer examples that help illustrate and explain how a concept or issue applies to real life. I am actively engaged in both my own education, and in the learning experiences of those around me.

While I don't expect to follow in Ms. Jyang's footsteps by founding an NGO, her example encourages me to continue making a difference where I am. I can help those around me. I can encourage others. My time and efforts can change the experience of one person. As I continue my education and become a lawyer, opportunities to help those in need will continue and expand, but I am energized to begin again right now.

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