

Reflections of my undergraduate years at Utah Valley University

Utah Valley University (UVU) celebrated the United Nations Day on October 24, 2017. The main theme of this year event was “UVU and the United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals.” UVU Office of Global Engagement, the main host, invited all interested programs and initiatives at campus to contribute to the celebration. During that event I represented a Peace and Justice Program at UVU. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #16 is named as “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” and it was my honor to share with audience which contributions our program made and plan to make in the future for the implementation of that goal. At the same time, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to reflect and inform students and faculty on my involvement and contributions to other strong UVU initiatives and in sustainable mountain development agenda of the United Nations as well.



(L to R): Mary Cisneros and Lacey Meyer during the United Nations Day at UVU

One of my most memorable moments at UVU came at the end of the Women of the Mountains Conference. UVU students, myself included, successfully hosted this special event under the umbrella of the United Nations Mountain Partnership as an engaged learning initiative on October 7-9, 2015. At a luncheon on the last day we invited as keynote speaker Kena Mathews, from the Utah County's Habitat for Humanity. It was October 9, 2015, and it just so happened that it was Kena's birthday that day. A cake was brought out for her and people sang Happy Birthday to her in celebration of her special

day. It was an International conference, so there were many women from many mountain countries around the world at that luncheon. The camaraderie I witnessed and experienced among the women was so great, that to help make Kena's birthday extra special, several renditions of Happy Birthday were sung in different languages. After the luncheon, we all took a trip to a home in Orem being built for a family, and helped work with the landscaping. It was truly amazing to see these women come together to help a family many thousands of miles from their own countries. I counted myself lucky to be a part of that and share this experience with them.

Now that I am nearing the end of my undergraduate career, I have been asked by the professor who involved me in activities of the Women of the Mountains Conference, Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev, to write down my reflections of my experience especially as non-traditional student who is a single mother and raises three children in addition to advancing with education. I have to say first, that my professors here at UVU have made all the difference between just getting my degree and running away with it, and actually getting a good solid education. They have been very supportive of my efforts, and have given me many opportunities to contribute my time and skills to activities we consider valuable. I have gratefully accepted these occasions to do what I feel is right and meaningful to me. Whether it has been helping to organize and network for the Women of the Mountains Conference, advocating for refugees and the rights of the Baha'is in Iran at various other conferences, or researching modern-day slavery and refugees for an NGO known as Summit, started by another professor here, Dr. Michael Minch, I feel that the most valuable part of my education has not been about my grade point average, but about being allowed to engage with the UVU community on issues that matter most to me. Issues like the impact of climate change and sustainability on mountain women and communities, for example.

If a new student asked me how to make the most out of their education here at UVU, I would say to that person, that they would go far to first, get involved, and second, just know that you have much to contribute, just as you have to learn. You don't have to wait until after you graduate to begin the work you have chosen to do. If it's important to you, then don't be afraid to take the opportunities given to you to do it. Don't worry if you think that you are not ready, because just the fact that you are in school means that you have some reason for choosing your career, and that reason is good enough to share with others, now, not later. I'm particularly speaking to perfectionists who might put off doing things because they might feel they are not ready. But if you put things off, chances are, you will never be ready, so I would say to them, to just jump in there and do it, and not to worry so much about whether you have the skills yet to do what is being asked of you, just accept the opportunity and rise to the occasion. It will be all right. Trust me. This is the most important thing I have learned from my professors, and from participating in activities here at UVU.

Mary Cisneros, UVU student