

UVU's Seventh Annual International Mountain Day: A Student's Perspective



On Monday, December 4, 2017, the Utah International Mountain Forum (a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University) and the Multicultural Student Center hosted their seventh consecutive International Mountain Day celebration. Held in advance this year of the International Mountain Day designated by the United Nations on the 11th, which falls during the week of Final exams this year, the event invited several important local and university figures to speak about topics related to this year's theme "Mountains Under Pressure: Climate, Hunger, and Migration." Introductions for each guest speaker were given by members of the UIMF, and the event was simultaneously shared live via social media.

After brief opening remarks by Jenny Hoppie, president of the Sustainable Mountain Development Club at UVU, the first speaker was Dr. Baldomero Lago. Dr. Lago is the CIO and Vice-Rector for Global Engagement at UVU, as well as the Honorary Consul of Spain in Utah. The central highlight of Dr. Lago's presentation was a live Skype call to UN headquarters in New York, where it was officially announced that UVU would be recognized as the first (and so far, only) university with NGO affiliate status with the UN not just in the state of Utah, but in the surrounding area as well. This is an important milestone for future interaction between UVU and the UN, with many exciting possibilities for future UN guests to share their knowledge with students, as well as for UVU students to become more aware and involved with the UN and its goals and the processes involved.

The next guest speaker was Orem city mayor Richard Brunst, who gave a speech about the importance of sustainable development, and the city's commitment to promoting this effort. Representing the city in which UVU is located, Mayor Brunst had a front-row seat to the rest of the celebration's proceedings, and received a certificate expressing gratitude for his and the city's support and recognizing his contributions to the goals of the UIMF and the UN. Given the nature of some of the presentations to follow (often passionate and at times critical of government action/inaction), Brunst's show of support impressed me.

Following Mayor Brunst's remarks and the reading of a prepared statement from Utah governor Gary Herbert, the following three speakers addressed the theme of this year's celebration: "Mountains Under Pressure: Climate, Hunger, and Migration." Chelsey Butchereit, a professor at the nearby Brigham Young University, spoke about the struggles facing refugees and the dangers of forced migration. Disdaining the use of visual aids and speaking in a general sense rather than to the particular vulnerability of mountain peoples and communities in these regards, Butchereit's

information was valuable and insightful, but missed an opportunity when it came to making a deeper connection with the purpose of the day.

The second speaker was Gina Cornia, Executive Director of Utahns Against Hunger. Cornia focused her speech on the issues of food insecurity and assistance measures in Utah in particular, with insightful information and visually engaging graphics. Being a mountainous community and generally regarded as ‘doing well’, Cornia’s impassioned presentation pointed out areas of improvement in the local community, but could have been improved by additional international perspective for International Mountain Day. Either coincidentally or ironically, refreshments were offered to attendees just prior to Cornia’s presentation.



Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev presents FAO-UN-Certificate of Contribution to Kristine Berghdal

The third topic speaker was UVU’s own Colleen Bye, representing the Citizens Climate Lobby. Building on the information provided by the other speakers before her, Professor Bye gave a local and global perspective on the struggles of climate change, particularly targeting energy concerns, pollutions, and sustainability. While I found Bye’s presentation to be the most on-topic of the topic speakers, it could have benefitted from a clearer focus on the consequences of climate change on mountain communities and ecology.

Following the topic speakers, and in line with UVU's policy of engaged student learning, two UVU students gave presentations on focused topics and their perspectives. Derek Garfield, Vice President of the Utah International Mountain Forum, deviated from his prepared remarks about the indigenous peoples of Sami, Sweden, to instead share his personal insights and perspectives as a member of the UIMF. Having moved many times when he was younger, Garfield had a unique perspective to share, though I do regret not also hearing about his prepared topic.

The second student speaker, and penultimate presenter of the event was Megan Raines, a recent graduate of UVU that returned to pursue her Master's degree. Raines' presentation centered around a case study highlighting a particular topic of concern, orphans and unsanctioned orphanages in Uganda. Her human-oriented approach was quite effective at putting a face to and meaning behind a vulnerability in a mountain community and the possible positive role social media can have in that, though it made me curious about the state's responses to this concern, and how it is viewed (or not viewed, as the case may be) by the international community.

Closing the event came Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev, former Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic to the U.S. and current Professor in the UVU Department of History and Political Science. Dr. Abdrisaev shared brief concluding remarks, tying together previous presentations by addressing their impacts on mountain communities in particular, to bring the various perspectives together into a cohesive picture of the state of the world's mountains and the struggles they face. Then, acting as a representative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, he presented the speakers, support staff, and every individual that had contributed to the causes and goals of the UIMF and UN with individual certificates expressing gratitude for their contributions and support for this initiative.

My overall impression of the UIMF International Mountain Day celebration was positive, if a bit less focused than I'd personally prefer. There were a few unscheduled speakers, and some technical difficulties with the Skype conference with the UN, but the information was insightful, and the impact it and this celebration will have – and has already had – on UVU, our local community, and hopefully other mountain communities around the world, is profound. Having lived in a mountain community my entire life, this level of care and concern for the future for my home, and the homes of others similar to me in this regard around the world, fills me with a cautious sort of hope for what we might accomplish.

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