

Nations Uniting on Mountain Tops: What Utah Offers to International Diplomacy

Since its inception, the United Nations had conducted all of its major US-based events at the UN headquarters in New York. But Utah just broke the trend. In hosting the 68th United Nations Civil Society (UNCS) Conference, Utah civil society showcased its hospitality on a global level. As a Florida native, Utah has impressed me with its clean cities, economic buoyancy, social outreach, religious tolerance, and political compromise. Its well-known faith tradition plays a critical role in fostering a culture of language learning, international inquiry, and raw goodwill. It is a land settled by refugees, and disproportionately continues to harbor them. From what I can see, Utah has long been uniquely positioned to host a major UN event.



(L to R): Mr. Kurmanbek Dyikanbaev and Paul Gallo

Among the thousands of officials attending the UNCS Conference was Mr. Kurmanbek Dyikanbaev, the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic to the Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament of Kyrgyzstan). Thanks to the connectivity of Utah Valley University (UVU), I received an invite from one of my former students, Mr. Samuel Elzinga (studying Political Science and National Security Studies) and Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev (faculty at History and Political Science Department of UVU) to help host the Kyrgyz official. Our venue was the home of Dr. Cenk Çalışkan - a Turkish immigrant and a Professor of Strategic Management and Operations at UVU.

Mr. Dyikanbaev was delighted by my missionary service in Kazakhstan and insisted that I use as much Kazakh language in our conversation as possible. Breaching linguistic and cultural barriers, we launched into an intimate discussion about Kyrgyz folklore, Islam, and my faith. Emotional barriers came down. Though a world apart, we felt a great love for each other, and at the conclusion of the evening, Mr. Dyikanbaev insisted that we take a photo in a good Kyrgyz embrace. Many factors and players facilitated this true diplomatic exchange. In my opinion, Mr. Elzinga's academic fervor and commitment to service, Dr. Abdrisaev's love for students and his relationship with his native Kyrgyzstan, the hospitality of Dr. Çalışkan's family, and my own love for Islam and Central Asia brought about this success. None of us involved were native to Utah, yet the spirit of interfaith and international friendship felt so uniquely Utahn. Truly, the mountain tops became our haven for gathering and showing solidarity.

That same feeling of friendship seemed to permeate the conference. As a UVU faculty member, I attended several panel meetings. During one workshop (co-hosted by UNICEF and LDS Charities) I was pleased to see an obvious working partnership and bond between UNICEF and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mr. Ryan Koch, director of the New York office of Public Affairs for the Church, explained concrete social media strategies to "convert" people to your cause. Much to the audience's delight, Mr. Koch jokingly acknowledged the religious demographic of Utah and clarified that he wasn't talking about converting to his faith. Simply put, he clarified our goal as civil society actors: to help others truly see what you are, and why you care about the things you do. During the Q&A session, participants and panelists exhibited genuine trust as they discussed productive PR practices in the spirit of fun and learning. What ensued from the cooperation, excitement, and hope that I saw? A first-of-its-kind outcome document "outlining a global vision for inclusive and sustainable cities and communities by

2030,”¹ received the praise of Mrs. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés , President of the General Assembly. “It seems clear that we need more cooperation, not less.” She declared: “It is a great honor to be the first President of the General Assembly to receive a UN Civil Society Conference outcome document.”²



(R to L): Paul Gallo, Kurmanbek Dyikanbaev and his wife, Tokona Dyikanbaeva

To me, it is fitting that this document was drafted here in Utah. We have faith, we love innovation, we take initiative, and we treasure friendship. When members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU, successfully added language to the outcome document, they did so with the inclusion of non-traditional students, and advocated for marginalized mountainous communities. Accordingly, I am excited to see the

¹ (2019, September 3). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ngo898.doc.htm>

² *ibid*

continued role that our mountain community will play in linking diverse world communities together in the spirit of inclusion and love.

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