

Promoting Mountain Women and Families at CSW61



(L to R): Regan Warner, Christian Jensen, Tony Medina and Munkhbat Batmunkh at the 61st Session of the United Nations Commission on Status of Women

For the second consecutive year, a delegation of students representing the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University (UVU) attended the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City during March 20-23, 2017. The main goal of the visit was to report to the participants and hosts of the CSW61 the major contribution of students to the promotion of gender and sustainable mountain development (SMD) agendas of the United Nations in the State of Utah and North America. This is accomplished by hosting the international Women of the Mountains Conferences (WOMC) since 2001. The distinguished feature of the UIMF approach is that students advocate SMD as experiential learning, or problem-based initiatives, when students learn through hands-on activities and teachers serve as only mentors and guides.

UIMF members were not able to achieve their goal of hosting a side or parallel event, or to make an official statement during the CSW. However, they acquired the valuable experiences to achieve it next time.

After nearly three years as the president of the UIMF, I was able to achieve, with the help of my peers, recognition for our contribution to gender and SMD from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-UN). I am now fully confident that new UIMF leaders will be able to accomplish any goal at the UNWomen and CSW. While everyone in our delegation

had their specific role in the preparations for CSW61, I felt it most fitting to look back on my own experiences and share them here.

The main mission of the UIMF (www.utahimf.org) is to highlight the efforts of students as the driving force behind advocacy and action in raising an awareness of the United Nations sustainable mountain development (SMD) agenda in State of Utah and North America. Every student at UVU brings their own unique perspective, personal motivations, and experiences of being part of the Utah model of sustainability--one of the best in the United States--in order to advocate on all levels that makes the UIMF so successful in implementing the experiential learning model of UVU. My own path began after a long career in the United States Army where I experienced poverty in its rawest form in Iraq and Afghanistan; although I also had the honor of serving with, and leading, the most professional soldiers in the world, I recognize that in order to resolve problems of violence and strife around the world we need to promote sustainable development. With these powerful and unique experiences, I also began my education at UVU as a non-traditional student in my late 20's. Non-traditional students are a significant portion of the UVU student body, and tend to be overlooked by the vast majority of groups seeking volunteers and champions of their causes. The UIMF has been able to attribute our successes by capitalizing on these overlooked niches of advocacy with focus on mountain communities, the most forgotten and left behind category across the world.

I joined the UIMF in January 2014 when I was introduced to the coalition members by a co-worker named Colten Sponseller. I immediately began working on preparations for the 4th international Women of the Mountains conference under the umbrella of the FAO-UN on October 7-9, 2015. It was implemented for the first time as experiential learning model. Over the course of a year and a half, the student organizing committee raised funds for the event, prepared and distributed call for papers, contacted foreign dignitaries and scheduled their travel/accommodations, collected papers for panels, scheduled rooms and catering, and community outreach. The conference was a tremendous success: for the first time the United Nations Secretary General's Report on SMD A/71/256 from July 29, 2016 recognized UIMF as a student group, which hosted WOMC and contributed to the implementation of several sustainable development goals (SDGs), including SDG #5 on gender, and illustrated further the true potential of experiential learning by non-traditional students.

During March 14-17, 2016, I represented UVU at the CSW 60. As this was the first time we had attended this event, it was a definite learning experience. As it was my first time in New York City, my first learning experience was navigating the public transportation metro system. But the most important was to navigate the United Nations Headquarters and the immense amount of side/parallel events in order to hold a similar UIMF activity in the future: who hosted them, how they were organized, their logistic and financial details as well. It was a phenomenal experience, and it definitely prepared me to lead the next year's excursion to CSW61.

Preparations to travel to CSW61 began in September 2016 when Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev, the UIMF advisor, began coordinating our attendance with long time UIMF partners: Dr. Rusty Butler, the main representative of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, an NGO with consultative status under the UN, and Wendy Jyang, President of Utah China F.I.S.H. D&C, another NGO with

consultative status under the UN. The original plan was for the UIMF to host our own side/parallel event at the CSW. Next on the list was securing funds for the travel and hotel accommodations for a larger delegation to travel to New York. In October 2016, I began a fundraising campaign and writing the applications for grants from the UVU Engaged Learning in the Liberal Arts (ELLA) grant sponsored by the College of Humanities and Social Studies (CHHS), and the Grant for Engaged Learning (GEL) sponsored by the Office of Engaged Learning of UVU. We reached out for advice and mentoring from the department of History and Political Science's chair, Dr. David Connelly, and Dr. Hong Pang, Assistant Professor - History and Political Science, Chinese Studies. After a short wait, we learned that we had been awarded our full requested amounts from both ELLA and GEL.

After receiving the funds, we began deciding on the delegation members that would represent UVU at CSW, as well as arranging travel and accommodations. Students would be responsible for their own food and intercity travel. The department's administrative assistant, Kimberly Williamson, a longtime supporter of the UIMF and non-traditional student's involvement in extracurricular activities, monitored the use of the funds in accordance with UVU policy. Within a week, she helped to arrange the logistics of the entire trip.

The trip was scheduled for four students to attend: myself serving as the co-leader of the group; Christian Jensen, the current president of the UIMF, coordinating activities of the delegation members; Regan Warner, the president of the Sustainable Mountain Development Club, PR and media liaison; and Munkhbat Batmunkh, Vice President of the Foreign Affairs Club, responsible for protocol and scheduling. Additionally, Dr. Abrisaev would attend as our mentor, and Kimberly Williamson both as administrative support and non-traditional student herself.

Our trip was scheduled for March 19-23, 2017, but it all began on the "red-eye" flight out of Salt Lake City directly to New York's JFK international airport. Needless to say we were all pretty tired when we arrived, and the flight was fraught with turbulence. Yet, as they always do, things fell into place as we collected our bags and caught our shuttle to the hotel. We had arrived a bit early for check-in, so we checked our bags and set out to explore the city. We later explored China Town, little Italy, and mid-town respectively. After an afternoon of walking, we were all pretty exhausted and returned to the hotel for a brief nap. For dinner, the four students ate at a delicious French Bistro. We then retired to our rooms to prepare for Monday morning where our tasks would begin.

Our day began at 9 AM where we walked to the UN Security office to collect our security credentials to access the UN compound. As this was the first time Christian, Regan, and Munkhbat had been to the UN, they had to wait in line to have their badges made.

After that, the delegation members had meetings at three Permanent Missions to the UN to report on their contribution to the gender agenda through the hosting of the WOMCS, and discussed plans for further partnerships. During the meeting with Mrs. Guamaral Altangerel, Deputy Chief of Mission of Mongolia, delegation members explained UIMF's goals in creating a partnership of mountainous countries to advocate for the SDGs through the lens of mountains regions, similar to the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Students also extended an invitation to the Mongolian

diplomat to visit UVU. Our next meeting was with Mrs. Elisabeta David, Deputy Chief of Mission of Romania to the UN, where we conveyed regards to Dr. Ion Jinga, PR of Romania to the UN who attended the WOMC in 2015 and discussed the opportunities to collaborate with Romanian students who work along similar lines as us. And finally, the UVU delegation met with Mrs. Katalin Annamária Bogyay, Permanent Representative of Hungary to the UN. Ambassador Bogyay, expressed a strong interest to advocate for mountain women and family at the UN, and suggested we follow up in a few days to work out details. This was an important day for our delegation, reminding our members of the importance of promoting their goals by relying on old friends and diplomats, whom UVU has hosted in previous years.



*UVU Delegation at the UN (L to R):
Christian Jensen, Munkhbat Batmunkh, Regan Warner, Tony Medina and Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev*

On the second day, taking into account that for several members of delegation it was their first ever visit to New York we took the opportunity to see the sights in Manhattan before our meeting in the afternoon. Some members of the delegation attended a side event “Family capital: the engine of Women’s Development in the SDGs,” sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the UN in collaboration with Sustainable Families Group, Universal Peace Foundation, International Organization for the Family, and the United Families International. It was an important gathering that gave us an opportunity to learn how to host a similar event for UIMF members in the future. I personally took the opportunity to visit the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the 9/11 museum and memorial, and Wall Street. The day ended with a trip to the UN headquarters to take photos and see the unique gifts that nations have given to the UN. That evening, I then visited Times Square and the Empire State Building. Needless to say, it was a very busy day.

Our third and the final day in attendance at CSW61, was started from the “Informal NGO morning briefing,” by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at Conference Room 4, GA Building, UN, when we were able to interact with representatives of many NGOs from around the world and distribute our handouts about WOMCs. During our next meeting with Ms. Mirgul Moldoisaeva, Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations, we discussed several initiatives to work together with a focus on gender and SMD. The envoy from Kyrgyzstan was excited to continue the traditional partnership established between UVU and the Kyrgyz Republic since 1999. The final item on our agenda was to attend a presentation of Operation Underground Railroad, a Utah non-profit that specializes in rescuing trafficked humans in the sex trade. UIMF hosted president of that NGO, Timothy Ballard during the WOMC in 2015 and our presence during their event at CSW extended our cooperation. After that was over and complete, we all went out to dinner to celebrate the end of the visit and discuss its major outcomes and plans for the future participation at CSW.

It was a bittersweet way to end my leadership at the UIMF. But I am confident that under the leadership of Christian, Regan, Munkhbat, and many other non-traditional students who are passionate about mountain cause and women, the coalition will be in good hands for years to come. There are many things on the horizon for myself and the others that will require collaboration and use of the skills we have all learned and polished. This trip is just a small piece that is the overall picture of experiential learning. I hope that our experiences will only help in advocating for mountains, gender and family causes, and non-traditional students across the world.

Tony Medina, President, UIMF (2014-2016)