

# My Experience With the International Women of the Mountains Conference

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From an early age, I have been exposed to people and cultures from around the world, due to living in a multicultural part of Sydney, Australia. I was born in Latin-America and travelled a lot as a child with my parents where I was able to experience life with relatives abroad. Growing up in a different land to that of my parents, my personal culture became a mixture of the two, Latin-American and Australian. By the time I was an adult I was a seasoned traveller with a great appreciation for the cultures of the world. When I moved to the United States most of the studies I had done in Australia were not recognized so I had to go back to school. I enrolled into, what was known as, Utah Valley State College as a non-traditional student. To this day I am grateful to UVU's open enrolment policy as it provided me with the opportunity to better myself. I finished my Undergraduate Degree in Digital Media and then went on to get a Master's Degree in Information Science and Learning Technologies. I have always believed that education is key to a life of unlimited potential and I am a strong advocate for the belief that education should be freely available to all regardless of gender, age or location.

In 2005, working as a Technology Teaching Assistant at Utah Valley State College, I learned that the school had access to video conferencing equipment. That same year I was able to get permission to use the equipment and organized a series of international video lectures with Universities that I had built a relationship with in my travels abroad. These were the days before Skype or Google Hangouts, so high-quality videoconferencing required expensive equipment that not all institutions could afford. This also meant working with the IT departments of the other institutions to configure protocols that would ensure a stable connection. The first of these videoconferencing lectures was organized between James Cook University in Australia and Utah Valley State College here in Utah. These lectures were presented live with attendees on both sides. One of the first lectures was from Australia. Dr Jamie Seymour, a leading expert on jellyfish, presented on a particularly deadly jellyfish that inhabits the tropic oceans of Australia. Mr. Mike Wisland from the Digital Media Department gave his presentation on the Beatles song, Strawberry Fields Forever. These presentations were enjoyed by audiences on both sides. There were also other video conferences with the Czech Republic, Spain, Brazil and a session with the U.S. Department of State. Technology has made it possible to connect people, share ideas, and mutually learn. This is the goal of the internationalization of education.

The experience with the video conferences taught me first hand, about the power of connecting people to share ideas and learn from each other. The idea of bringing people together appealed to me, and still does. It was through this interest that a few years later, I became acquainted with Dr. Baktybek Abdrysaev, the former Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United States. As faculty at UVU, he brought his considerable wealth of knowledge and diplomatic experience to the university, in building stronger ties between the mountain communities, his native country, the Rocky Mountain region and especially Utah through the United Nations sustainable mountain development (SMD) agenda.

Through this friendship, I began using my technical experience to help promote events that he would organize with his students. Eventually I was given the responsibility of managing the Women of the Mountains' website (<http://www.womenofthemountains.org>), which contained a vast amount of information about the international Women of the Mountains Conferences, hosted by Utah Valley University as major contribution to the promotion of SMD in State of Utah and North America. I was responsible for adding content and making updates to the website as events were organized. I also became involved with the Utah International Mountain Forum, a coalition of student clubs at UVU that became the main force for SMD advocacy. Here student engagement was promoted through organizing events, hosting dignitaries, and sharing experience with a wider community on a state, regional and global levels. My Andean heritage also played a part in my interest, as many of my ancestors came from the mountain regions of South America.

My first experience with the International Women of the Mountains Conference was at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference, which was held in 2011. Here I volunteered with providing technical support to presenters, volunteers and attendees of the conference. The conference was held at the main campus of Utah Valley University so I was able to interact with many of the guest speakers, some of which came from overseas, and learn more about the work that they did to promote sustainable development in various mountain regions. It was the first time I had been directly involved in an international conference. After the Women of the Mountains Conference I began to help with the United Nations International Mountain Day celebrations at UVU campus. In 2003 the United Nations General Assembly declared December 11 as the International Mountain Day, and celebrations have been held at UVU since 2010.

My involvement with the International Women of the Mountains Conference and the Utah International Mountain Forum led to being part of a delegation from Utah Valley University sent to the United Nations headquarters in New York City in December, 2013. Due to the work of Dr. Rusty Butler, Associate VP for International Affairs and Diplomacy at UVU, and his personal ties to many diplomats at the United Nations, the University was able to secure seats to observe the 6<sup>th</sup> Session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These seats were provided by the Permanent Mission of Hungary to the U.N. Attending this meeting was an incredible experience for us, as we witnessed first-hand how the delegates of each nation worked to add details to what would become the SDGs and the roadmap for global community development until 2030. We were there for three days and after each session was over we were able to meet and interact with some of the delegates

from the different nations, and this was exciting. This trip has been one of the highlights of my life and I hope to repeat it in the future.

The 4<sup>th</sup> International Women of the Mountains Conference, held under the umbrella of the United Nations Mountain Partnership, took place at Utah Valley University in October 2015. My involvement in the conference was as the organizing committee's liaison to the University of Utah. The committee was primarily made up of students as well as partners, all under the guidance of Dr. Abdrisaev and other faculty. A few weeks prior to the conference I arranged for the student organizing committee the presentation at the University of Utah to invite students there to join organizing committee and to contribute to the conference at UVU. As a tradition, I was also tasked with updating the Women of the Mountains website and added information needed by attendees. This was also the first conference where social media was used to help promote the conference and its goals in support of the SDG#5 on gender. During the conference, I also gave a presentation about the importance of Social Media in the promotion of grassroots efforts and how it could be used to reach more people with little to no cost compared to traditional methods of promotion. The presentation also showed how visits to the websites had significantly increase since social media was introduced as a promotional tool. I had the opportunity to meet many amazing people who are passionate about gender and environmental issues. It was also a pleasure to meet officers from global NGOs like Ms. Mia Rowan from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-UN). Working directly with partners like her helps promote our work to a wider audience.

That same year I organized an International Mountain Day Celebration at the University of Utah. This was held on 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 2015 in the Gould Auditorium which is located in the Marriott Library. I was supported by Kamaile Harris, who works with the Pacific Heritage Academy as well as she became the Salt Lake City Liaison for the UIMF. I was, at the time, the University of Utah Liaison and had built relationships with many important organizations such as: the Marriott Library, the Office of Sustainability, the Bennion Center, the Hinckley Institute and local Non-Profits. We promoted the event via social media as well as through internal channels at the University, there was even promotion through local radio station KRCL. The event started with a song by students of the Pacific Heritage Academy which was a great way to begin the event. The evening continued with students, from the University of Utah, who spoke about the issues relating to community and sustainability in the local mountain region. The main speaker of the event as Jason Singer Smith, who is a prominent mountain climber and author. The event was well received by audience and participants and brought to the attention of the community the importance of mountain issues.

I enjoy my continued relationship with the members of the organizing committee of the Women of the Mountains conference and the Utah International Mountain Forum. To further my education in SMD, I took courses from the University of the Highlands and Islands in the United Kingdom as well as the University of Utah. I have had the opportunity to meet and work with so many great people over the years and had experiences that I

could not have had it not been for my involvement with these organizations. The opportunity to be a part of something greater than myself and help improve the lives of people locally and around the world is something that has no price and will cherish for all of days.

***Carlos Alarco - UIMF***