

International Mountain Day
Utah Valley University
December 6, 2022
Handen Torsak

Ladies and gentlemen, I am Handen Torsak. I am a student here at UVU and I am studying political science with a focus on global politics. Though I am only 21, I've lived in and observed the people in mountain communities in the Rockies, the Appalachians, and the Carpathians while I lived in Slovakia. Out of all the people I have met and seen, I have the privilege to speak a little about a few women of the mountains who have had a great impact on my life... one being my Mom, Deann Torsak.

Married with 4 children, she returned to school as a non-traditional student. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science with an emphasis on American Government with minors in Constitutional studies and Native American studies in 2017. While she tended to her family and her studies at UVU she was involved in the projects under the Umbrella of the Utah International Mountain Forum. My mom was the executive secretary that helped coordinate and organize the International Women of the Mountains conference in 2015 and in 2016 this exact celebration. These events brought in dignitaries from all over the world to UVU and our family had the privilege of having two women from Hunza Valley of Pakistan stay at our house for a time.

As I mentioned we had two women from Pakistan stay with us for a few weeks in those two years; Noorani Barkat and Mehak Asad.. There was one common feature uniting them with my Mom - they were all women of the mountains. During their stay, I saw a great deal of unique and beautiful differences in culture and beliefs and learned powerful lessons about tolerance. They would spend time asking us questions and participating in some of our cultural practices and we were blessed to learn from them and participate in some of their cultural practices.

When Noorani came she introduced me to the glory of middle eastern food, and she taught me how to cook curry which is a skill I still practice. She also showed us the beauty of written Urdu. Noorani was a graduate student studying agriculture. Her reasoning for her chosen subject was so she could help her mountain community to develop. Let us learn this lesson from Noorani, whatever we may be studying or whatever our career is; we will find the greatest fulfillment in using our talents to help others thrive.

Now, Mehak was a filmmaker, who made a documentary about the unique Kalash people who are a small minority who live in the mountains of Pakistan. The Kalash people are an animist minority group among the majority of the Muslim population of Pakistan, so Mehak's documentary helped raise awareness about these wonderful people. We hosted Mehak at our house for the week plus had her for our Thanksgiving celebrations with extended family. One thing she gave to us was Islamic clothing which helped us experience part of her wonderful culture. She also visited and enjoyed interacting with students in my little sisters' elementary school, and taught me the importance of learning about and supporting those who are in need.

When Noorani and Mehak arrived they were strangers, but when they left they were family. They gave us honorary titles such as “mommy, dad, sister, brother.” Noorani would return to Utah to experience a family Christmas and later to introduce us to her wonderful husband Karim.

This is the lesson all of us need to learn, no matter where someone is from, their race, or religion we can learn from them and develop family like ties with them. My parents taught us through example this important lesson and helped us learn through an engaging environment that different cultures unites people and can enrich our lives. This was my experience when I engaged in different cultures, and it can be your experience too. Let us be kind towards all. Let us seek to understand others and build bridges of trust and not walls of intolerance.

Another lesson that my parents and people of this conference showed us was that most often success comes through a team effort. Frequently we hear people express all of their different accomplishments, but this wasn't the approach my Mom took. Growing up she would frequently tell us that there was “No “I” in team” and this is a statement she lives by to this day. While it is true she did many things during her time here at UVU, she contributes that success to her team of friends and colleagues.

If you take nothing else from my presentation, I hope that you will take this, we have far more in common with people around the world than we think. Of course, there are many differences, but when we choose to focus on our commonalities, we will discover a whole world of opportunity.

I am glad that I have been able to take part in this event hosted by the UIMF.

Thank you.