

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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BROOKE LOUGHRIN is the first-ever youth observer to join the U.S. delegation to the United Nations and is a junior in the Presidential Scholars Program at Boston College. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Mary Popeo** before her presentation on youth and diplomacy at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: Thank you, and welcome. We wanted to start by hearing about your experience. How did you learn of this opportunity and then come to apply for it?

LOUGHRIN: I heard about the opportunity over the summer through the State Department's Facebook page. I had just come back from a U.S. State Department program in Tajikistan, where I was studying Farsi. I have been involved with the United Nations for a long time—with the United Nations Association and with Model UN—so I was intrigued by the opportunity. I sent in my resume and a short essay. A few weeks later, in September, I was notified that I was a finalist. I interviewed via Skype, and on the Friday before the UN General Assembly opened, I received a phone call while I was meeting with my professor, Ali Banuazizi. They asked if I could be in New York in three hours. I had been selected. They said that they hoped they were not interfering with my weekend plans!

I spent the following days at UN General Assembly week, which is the most exciting week of the year at the UN. World leaders—not only those in government, but also people like Bill Gates—descend upon New York to spend the week at the UN. It was overwhelming to be there and have access to all of the events. When I went to the polio eradication event at the UN—which was the most important

event on polio in twenty-five years—I walked in the room and Bill Gates was standing on the stage with the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria. I went up to Bill Gates, said that I was from Seattle—we have that in common—and that I was the U.S. Youth Delegate. We



started talking and I thought that it was really extraordinary for a young person to have that level of access.

OWENS: What a great opportunity. So how are your activities planned? Are you sent as an ambassador of sorts, or do you choose the meetings you attend?

LOUGHRIN: In terms of the meetings I attend, a lot is dictated by my own policy interests, such as women and gender

issues. I also go to events that focus on youth. For example, in March I will join the State Department at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to discuss youth-related topics. I was also at the UN for three weeks in October to meet with the UN Youth Delegates from around the world.

OWENS: How many are there?

LOUGHRIN: This year, there were about forty Youth Delegates. It was a really diverse group of young people. Norway has had a Youth Delegate program at the UN since 1981. But this was the first year that Kenya had Youth Delegates. After two years spent lobbying every government agency in Kenya, two girls finally became Kenya's Youth Delegates. Persistence definitely pays off for young people. There were also Youth Delegates from Thailand, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Rwanda. We all had the opportunity to address the General Assembly on behalf of our delegations, which shook things up in the room.

OWENS: Why did the United States wait until 2012 to have a Youth Delegate?

LOUGHRIN: There are a lot of factors, one of the biggest being that—given the influence and size of the United States—taking on a Youth Delegate was not a small undertaking. Giving someone between the ages of eighteen and

twenty-four unofficial capacity in the U.S. delegation to the UN, was not a decision to be taken lightly. However, Ambassador Rice was a proponent of the program, and she finally decided to make it happen. People have been advocating for this program for a decade, and I was a beneficiary of that. Having a young person on the world stage made people nervous at first but the program is continuing next year, which is a wonderful sign that it was successful.

OWENS: How has your work at BC influenced what you bring to your role? The reason you were selected was because of your experiences and who you are. Can you speak a bit about what BC has done in that capacity?

LOUGHRIN: I've thought a lot about how being a BC student informs my work at the UN. I think one of the biggest influences has been studying Islamic Civilization and Societies. Through an Advanced Study Grant and an Islamic travel and research grant, I had the opportunity to study in Turkey during my freshman year. Last summer, I was in Tajikistan. The service opportunities at BC have also caused me to think about issues of development in Boston, the United States, and elsewhere. In addition to my coursework, I have been able to take Turkish and Farsi at BC, which was a huge advantage in terms of the application process for the program. In December, I did an interview with Voice of America in Farsi. Not a lot of students can say that they have the ability to do that, which is a testament to the types of opportunities that BC students have for language acquisition and travel. Also, my professors encouraged me to apply for the program.

My undergraduate research fellowship with Dr. Banuazizi was also particularly helpful. We focus a lot on public opinion surveys in the Middle East and attitudes toward democracy and the role of Islam in politics after the Arab Spring. This research has informed my ability to participate in conferences on the topic of

the Middle East, which is certainly one of the most important points of discussion at the UN right now.

OWENS: How important are language skills to this endeavor and to your understanding of youth diplomacy in particular?

LOUGHRIN: They are absolutely essential. When I was first selected, the other Youth Delegates did not have high expectations for my language skills.

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Understandably, they believed that Americans rely on English as they travel through the world. Being able to conduct an interview in a variety of languages definitely gave me credibility amongst my peers. Knowing another language also allows you to pick up on nuances that you don't notice with translations. At the UN, you can listen to committees in many different languages, but there is something important about being able to connect with a speaker in his or her own native language.

Also, English is not the dominant language at the UN. Since the UN has agencies all over the world, it is not enough to know English. A lot of the Youth Delegates say that if you speak English, you start at zero. English does not count, since everyone has studied it! Most people prefer to engage in their native language. It is a sign of respect when you can engage with them in this manner. When Americans expect everyone to speak English, the sense of respect for another culture is often lost. Showing that you have taken the time to gather language skills is important to communicating cultural respect.

POPEO: What first piqued your interest in Islamic civilization? You have had opportunities to travel to many countries. What drew you to the Middle East and to Iran in particular?

LOUGHRIN: I originally became interested in Islamic Civilization and Societies after travelling to Iran during my senior year in high school with a United Nations-sponsored delegation. When I heard that the delegation was not taking any young people, I tried to get involved. The youngest person on the delegation was about fifty! I remember thinking that 60 percent of Iran's population is under thirty. Who in the delegation was going to engage with these people? So I contacted the head of the delegation. Not only did he allow me to participate, but he also helped me to raise the \$6,000 required to go. In less than three weeks, people were sending me checks from across the country to support my trip. I spent about a month in Iran, which really piqued my interest in the region. After coming to BC and discovering the stunning array of offerings and coursework in political science, art, history, language, and theology, I knew that Islamic Civilization and Societies was what I wanted to study.

POPEO: How does the UN take the contribution of the Youth Delegates into account? How, as young people, can we affect what goes on at the UN?

LOUGHRIN: The question about youth participation at the UN is at the core of my position. It is one thing to have young people participate. However, it can be discouraging to feel that you are not making a meaningful contribution or that you are not being taken seriously. There has been a big push to give Youth Delegates influence both within their delegations and in the broader forum of the UN. For this reason, there are opportunities for Youth Delegates to address the Assembly. It is truly tremendous that a delegation would cede its speaking time to a Youth Delegate. There has also been an effort to influence other delegations—especially those that have youth bulges—to have a Youth Delegate participate, either in their UN delegation, in their UNESCO delegation, or in other youth forums. Countries like China, India, Brazil, and Egypt do not have Youth Delegates. We are hoping that, eventually, public pressure will lead to more Youth Delegate programs. But this is a lingering question.

Actually, for the first time this year, the Secretary General has appointed a point person for youth policy. He selected a young man from Jordan to coordinate all interagency policy on youth at the UN. People have lobbied for this for a long time, and the application process was extremely competitive. The fact that there is now a person accountable for youth policy at the UN is a huge step in the right direction.

OWENS: Are you going on a listening tour of sorts around the United States? You are by nature a representative of young people in America, and yet you have a particular set of experiences. How does your role in the delegation involve reaching out or listening?

LOUGHRIN: What is interesting about some of the other Youth Delegates is that they do incorporate a listening tour before travelling to the UN, which I think is ideal. For example, the Youth Delegates from Australia and Thailand travelled up to 6,000 kilometers across their country



in both rural and urban areas, speaking with thousands of young people. I would love our program to be like that. Since the selection process happened so late, it has been a reverse experience for me. I spent a lot of time at the UN last year, and now I'm traveling and talking to school groups. For example, over winter break, I gave talks at a number of schools in my hometown of Seattle, which is very far from the UN geographically. It surprised me that a lot of young people have never heard of the UN or the State Department. They have not had opportunities to travel. Only 28 percent of Americans have passports, and some of these are used simply to travel to Canada. This was a reminder that I have had exceptional opportunities through being a student at BC and at my high school. It challenges me to make my experiences real for young people that have never left their state, let alone the country.

I remember speaking to my little cousins' school located in a rural area outside of Seattle. I thought it would be really impressive to talk about my experience working with Hillary Clinton. But the students did not know who she was, so that did not go over too well! This is a component that the State Department is looking to improve with the program. Social media makes communication much easier. Young people from all over the country reach out to me through

email, Twitter, or my blog. We want young people to feel like they can interact with and relate to the person representing them. It is also a huge geographical challenge. The United States is much larger than most countries, making it more difficult to do a listening tour. But I would definitely like to see this improve in the future.

OWENS: Finally, what is on tap for you post-graduation? What would you like to do?

LOUGHRIN: This experience has reinvigorated my interest in working for the UN. Surprisingly, the UN has a very difficult time recruiting American staff and I am not entirely sure why. I think that it is important for Americans to be engaged with the UN. Public opinion polling in the United States shows that Americans overwhelmingly support U.S. engagement with the UN. Yet there is a lot of partisanship when it comes to the role of the United States in the UN, as we saw with the vote in Congress on disabilities. I would like to continue to work to improve the U.S.-UN relationship. The UN is only as strong as the support that it receives from its member states, but I do think it is the most effective voice on international issues.

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