

# **STATEMENT**

**Dr. Rusty Butler**

**Utah Valley University**

**69<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

**Side Event**

***The Kyrgyz Republic – State of Utah advocacy to empower mountain women and girls through ethically good student-centric education***

**March 11, 2025**

I am honored to participate in this Side Event with the Honorable Aida Kasymalieva and other distinguished colleagues who promote good will between Utah and the Kyrgyz Republic.

Our relationship with this great nation and its people began 26 years ago in 1999 when we met Ambassador Abdrisaev and his wife Cholpon in Washington, D.C. They accepted our invitation to visit Utah Valley University where they met many people who would also become friends, confidants, and students of our mutual cultures and heritages.

UVU built ties with International University of Kyrgyzstan and Osh Technological University and further pursued educational exchanges. As one of important educational programs students from both sides jointly advocated for mountain communities through student-engaged learning. This model encourages students jointly resolve practical issues important for local communities with their teachers mentoring them.

This led to other reciprocal visits of Kyrgyz dignitaries to Utah and vice versa. Among those from Utah who went to Bishkek was former Utah Senate President John Valentine and his wife Karen where he worked with leaders of the parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh. This began several exchanges and educational sharing between our respective legislative bodies.

The exchanges reached a zenith in 2003 when Utah Governor Olene Walker and her husband Myron led a delegation of dignitaries to Kyrgyzstan to celebrate the 2200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its statehood. We were honored to meet with then-President Askar Akaev and his wife Miriam, as well as the prime minister and other government ministers and senior legislators.

That delegation also included Elder Russell M. Nelson who is now the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This organization subsequently donated \$5

million to support “No Time to Waste,” UNICEF’s global initiative to address childhood malnutrition in Kyrgyzstan and other nations. It also partnered with UNICEF in Kyrgyzstan through the “Maternal and Neonatal Tetanus Elimination Initiative” to provide immunization services and prevent childhood disease outbreaks, and worked with the Mercy Corps to plant orchards in Kyrgyzstan to benefit schools.

In 2004 my late wife Danielle and I joined with Governor Walker to host President Akaev and his wife in Utah where they met with corporate, religious, education, and government officials. Utah Valley University conferred an honorary doctorate degree on First Lady Miriam Akayeva for her work with women and children. (<https://www.ksl.com/article/82339/kyrgyzstan-first-lady-awarded-honorary-degree>)

Throughout the years exchanges continued between Utah and Kyrgyzstan which including cultural exchanges. For example, in 2023 His Excellency Baktybek Amanbaev, the Kyrgyz Ambassador in Washington, D.C. and his wife Almazkan Akmatova were hosted in the home of a musically talented Utah Keller family to meet community leaders and hear typical American “Blues” music. Her Excellency Aida Kasymalieva and husband visited Utah several times where she lectured to university students and met with many key individuals to further Utah-Kyrgyz relations.

During 2009, we held conferences in Utah, Washington, D.C., and Bishkek entitled "Traditions of Rule of Law, Good Governance and Consultative Government in the Turkic World." This allowed our students to explore governance traditions in Turkic-speaking regions including Kyrgyzstan as laid out in a famous 11th century manuscript titled “Wisdom of Royal Glory (Kutadgu Bilig).” As part of the conference activities, we reprinted its English translation, originally published by the University of Chicago Press in 1983.

There were many more exchanges, conferences, working meetings, and visits between Utah citizens and their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan. We grew to love the wonderful people, beautiful land, and unique culture of this amazing country. We sensed that, indeed, the people of Kyrgyzstan have a noble heritage inherited from Manas and earlier great men and women. My late wife, Dr. Danielle Butler, who served as the Honorary Consul General of the Kyrgyz Republic in Utah from 2003 to 2011, our daughter Rallet, and I developed a deep love for this magnificent country, its people, and the beauty of their culture.

We share the sentiments of Presiding Bishop Gérald Causse who said of the partnership with UNICEF’s humanitarian work in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere: “...we strive to create a world where every woman and child is cherished, protected and empowered.”

Thank you for your hospitality.