

Open World Kosovo Delegates

December 9-17, 2022

Friendship Force of Cedar Rapids-Iowa City hosted five delegates from Kosovo. Diana Nokaj, Majlina Kelmendi, Dea Gaxha, Bjram Jasaraj, Valon Xhabali and their facilitator, Luljeta Gjonbalaj were part of a week-long Open World leadership program from. The theme was 'Sustainability of Civic Society Organizations'. They were warmly welcomed by their hosts, Patty Potter, Joanie Lacayo, Stephanie & George Schulte and Jean & Dean Thomas at the Eastern Iowa Airport.



Each day of the week contained components for learning, exploring, and socializing. On Saturday, the highlight was a tour of Steeple Square in Dubuque. Formerly the St. Mary's campus, the block was overhauled to serve its neighbors. The church was converted to an event center, and the convent, school and rectory have become transitional housing, low income housing and a day care center. Shirley Rosencrans and Connie Williams hosted the group with lunch at Lot One, then on to the Mississippi River Museum and a quick stop at St. Francis Xavier Basilica on the way home.

Sunday was a day spent with hosts, then gathering as a group at Wickiup Hill Nature Center to meet with naturalist, Kent Rector. Kent joined the delegates, hosts and club members for an American classic Thanksgiving Dinner of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy and a potluck variety of side dishes and desserts. The interpreter, Qazim Doda, joined us for this event.



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Kirkwood Community College hosted the delegates on Monday, led by Mary Ann Nelson and Jim Steggall with presentations focusing on finance and sustainability. We thank Dean Dawn Wood and other professional Kirkwood faculty members for this day. The day ended with home hosted dinners provided by Rosie Russell & Jocko Hindricks, Nancy York & Tom Hess, and Margaret & Ron Nelson.

Highlights of Tuesday in Des Moines were the meeting with Deputy Secretary of State Michael Ross, then a tour of the Capitol, with lots of photo op's. We received a warm welcome at the Consulate of the Republic of Kosovo by Artan Duraku and Fatmir Rrahmanai, then stayed for an end of year celebration reception attended by Iowa National Guard leadership, Iowa Sister State board members and many Kosovar Nationals. The day hosts were Judy Frascht-Miner, Jim Steggall, and Connie Williams.



At the State Library of Iowa at the Capitol in Des Moines



Chief of Mission, Artan Duraku and other Kosovo visitors & staff, at the Republic of Kosovo Consulate in Des Moines
Note flags in picture

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Wednesday began at Groundswell, with breakfast and presentations by Matthew 25 and Feed Iowa First. After a tour of the Cedar Rapids Public Library, Laura Thomas moderated a panel discussion with representatives associated with Tanager Place, NewBoCo, Kiva Iowa and several other non-profit boards. The Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation shared their experiences with us. The last stop was a visit to Craft'd, where they were met by Councilwoman Ashley Vanorney, City Manager Jeff Pomeranz and several others in the business community. Ashley gave the delegates an impromptu tour of City Hall!

On Thursday, Iowa City arts spokespeople and University of Iowa Arts Directors provided a tour of public art downtown, a round table discussion on community engagement & sustainability efforts and a visit to Riverside Theatre, all areas of interest to several of the delegates. After lunch at Encounter Cafe, round table discussions were hosted by University of Iowa professors from the College of Law, the Dean of International Programs, Tippie College of Business, and College of Education. This provided a new perspective, as several professors have worked with Kosovo students both in Iowa and in Kosovo. Gayle Bray, Christine Allen and Dean Thomas hosted the delegates.

Friday was the day when delegates met one-on-one with local professionals in their areas, which they all enjoyed immensely. The tired, but happy group, reported the highlights of the week at the wrap up lunch session. After free time, the group attended an Orchestra Iowa Winter Concert at the Paramount Theatre with 25 Friendship Force members. The concert served as the farewell, as they had a 6am flight the next morning. I hope we all stay in touch with our Kosovo friends!

This final report serves as a record of an Open World/ Congressional Office of International Leadership hosting experience. In review, please know that the delegates were all very complimentary about their experiences and adventures, and enjoyed the time shared with all of the Friendship Force hosts. Luljeta, the facilitator and Qazim, the interpreter, were very impressed by the quality of the experiences, both in the programming and people we were able to pull into this week long workshop, and with how smoothly the week progressed. And it is all due to the excellent cooperation, coordination, creativity and caring of our Friendship Force club, particularly our wonderful planning committee. Thank you so much! Additional kudos to the hosts, drivers, day hosts and dinner hosts. Thank you! We are all richer for this experience, it was a pleasure.

The planning committee members were Judy Frascht-Miner, Gayle Bray, Shirley Rosencrans, Christine Allen, Mary Ann Nelson, Laura Thomas, Patty Potter, Connie Williams, Jim Steggall, and mentors, Steve Williams and Vic Klopfenstein.

