



*Civilizations Exchange &
Cooperation Foundation*

Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW)

Youth Intercultural, Interfaith and Leadership Conference

Baltimore USA

April 26-30, 2017



Youth Leaders Representing 32 Countries



Seeking deeper understanding



Sharing the goals of world peace and harmony



Coming as strangers with common misunderstandings, leaving united as close friends



Developing mutual respect and recognizing there is strength in diversity



Departing empowered, ready for peace-building and making a global change

Albania

Bangladesh

Bulgaria

Egypt

Estonia

Georgia

Germany

Ghana

India

Indonesia

Jordan

Kazakhstan

Kyrgyzstan

Lebanon

Liberia

Libya

Malaysia

Moldova

Nigeria

Pakistan

Philippines

Romania

Senegal

South Africa

Sweden

Syria

Tajikistan

Tunisia

Turkey

Ukraine

United Arab Emirates

United States of America

Wednesday, April 26th 2017

Introductions and Welcome

The conference began with introductions by 90 participants, many of whom were currently in the United States on International Exchange through the U.S. Department of State's YES, FLEX and CBYX programs. It was inspiring to listen to students from 32 different countries stating why they wanted to come to the BUBW conference and explaining their ultimate goals and ambitions in their lives.

“Our lovely world is sinking and we have to save it.” – Malick, YES student, Senegal

We were welcomed by Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, President and Founder of CECF, the organization that created *Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW)*. He summarized his mission with the conferences and told the participants what to expect over the next four days. “When I look out across this room, I see sincerity, honesty and, most importantly, I see the light of God in all of you. Believe it or not for me, just to listen to you tonight by itself, is enough. For me, if I did not do anything in my life, just to bring these youth together from all over the world is enough.” He went on to encourage everyone to be open to the message of the conference and realize that we all are called to be instruments of change. “It is up to you to change the world for better.”

Thursday, April 27th 2017

The first day started with breakfast and the participants continued getting to know one another as they looked forward to their first day of learning. It was great to see their already developed relationships as they laughed and gathered together to take group pictures and selfies. It was hard to believe most of them had met less than 24 hours before. World change was already taking shape.



Imam Arafat set the tone for the day in his welcome session, **The World Today, The Family of Adam and Eve: The Need for Crossing the Cultural Divide as We Discover Current Realities in Our World**. He asked various participants to stand and summarize the current cultural and political climate in their countries, highlighting the challenges and conflicts within each region. This began the discussion for the *International Youth Summit (IYS)*, which would continue for the rest of the day's sessions.

International Youth Summit (IYS)

During the International Youth Summit (IYS) sessions, the participants first talked about the conflicts around the world. As students gave these summaries, Imam Arafat would then ask, “How many of you knew about these issues in this particular country?” Very few were able to raise their hands. This made it clear that the need to be informed and aware is great. It was also interesting to note the patterns within certain regions of the world. The participants began to strategize possible solutions. The room was divided into groups by region in order to encourage participation. The students had to have discussions on each side of the issue as the rest of their group listened. Each debater needed to present reasons why their opinion and side was valid and the rest of the group mediated.



“The world is not the peaceful place that we desire it to be. There are social, political and religious conflicts everywhere.” – Abdul, YES student, Ghana

Multiple issues facing future generations: **What are the problems and what are possible solutions / contributions / approaches to a better world?**



Another important challenge this day was to answer how the BUBW as Alumni could make change in the world when they went back to their home countries. Posters were made in regional groups and presented to all - detailing obstacles that might be faced and how to overcome them.



International Youth Summit sessions taught all of the participants that there is beauty in diversity.



This day was important in a number of ways. Sharing the challenges and conflicts within each country around the world gave the students a sense of self, and also was key in making each realize how much awareness they have of their own country's issues. Listening to each other was eye-opening because it was clear that while we may know the problems our own country is facing, we still have a lot to learn about other countries worldwide. In the end, it was about connecting similarities and not differences. Each country may have specific unique challenges, but many of them stem from the same place. Everyone plays a part in the solutions and all can come together and work for change. One revelation from this conference that remained constant: These were the leaders of tomorrow and they had the will and determination to effect change in the world.



Student Presentations

My Country, Culture and People: A Peak at a Day in My Life

Student presentations taught lifestyle, traditions and cultural values of each country.



Friday, April 28, 2017

Interfaith Program: Visits to a church, synagogue and mosque

In this world of intolerance, aggression and misinterpretation, there are those that see happiness, tolerance and the vision of coexistence. The Interfaith day gave the opportunity to visit the sacred places of Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. The leaders of these three distinct communities shared their practices and beliefs. While some differences were apparent, the beauty was in the similarities with one another.

**Our Lady of the Angels
Father Bill Au and Father Leo Larrivee**

The Fathers were so generous in sharing their practices and beliefs and the students were invited to ask questions. From basic questions about the Bible to how Catholicism relates to other religions, the questions were varied and much was learned.



Oseh Shalom Synagogue Rabbi Doug Heifetz

Rabbi Heifetz shared from his heart about Judaism. Again, as at Our Lady of the Angels, there were more hands in the air for questions than there was time to answer all of them. A question was asked why the flag of Israel was prominently displayed. "Israel has historic value in our books. Many of our important events have taken place in Israel," answered Rabbi Heifetz. There was a special moment after questions when the Torah was opened and everyone was able to look at it closely.



Indonesian Muslim Association of America (IMAAM)

Imam Fahmi Zubir

Since this was a Friday, all who wished were able to participate in Jumu'ah (congregational Friday prayer) either to observe or pray. It was a special honor that Imam Arafat was asked to speak and lead the prayer. After, one of Imam Arafat's friends, Dr. Sahar graciously agreed to give a talk about feminism in the Muslim culture. Her message was thought-provoking. "It frees the woman from the societal expectations of being beautiful externally," she said, while answering a question about Muslim women who wear the hijab. After lunch, Jumu'ah and this talk, there was an Interfaith Panel Discussion with Father Bill Au, Imam Arafat, and Imam Zubir.



Traditional Indonesian food. The meals were chosen for BUBW carefully, in order to experience food from all over the world.



Recreation and Relaxation at Martin Luther King Jr Park Dinner at Shaheen Restaurant (Pakistani-American Cuisine)

After a busy and enlightening interfaith day, it was time for some fun at the park.
A game of football was organized where students and chaperones played.

“Even though Pakistanis and Indians were not good at it (because we love cricket), we learned a lot about teamwork, collaboration, and cooperation. It was just like home.” – Sehar, YES Student, India

Some chose to simply watch, while others had more fun just relaxing with new friends.
It was a perfect ending to an amazing day.



Saturday, April 29th, 2017

Global Citizenship, Communication and Networking Session

As the participants prepared to return to their home country as alumni, the day began with a forum on the importance of communication and networking. Mr. Robert Stucky and Mr. Rizwan Siddiqi were the guest speakers.



Baltimore Inner Harbor and National Aquarium

The mass of purple CECF shirts descended upon Baltimore's Inner Harbor. It was a picnic lunch and then a short walk around the harbor to the National Aquarium.



"It was great to explore one of the USA's most exciting and interesting cities. The aquarium had flora and fauna from all around the world." – Meri, FLEX student, Georgia



End of Program Banquet Performances and Certificate Ceremony

CECF was proud to welcome many guests to our Banquet and Certificate Ceremony:

- **Minister Counsellor Raja**, Embassy of Indonesia in DC, who delivered Ambassador Bowoleksono's Keynote Address
- **John Brown**, US Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan
- **Peter and Penny Kovach**, Director, at the US Department of State
- **Firdaus Kadir and Oscar Zaky**, IMAAM Center in Silver Spring, Maryland
- **Dr. Asmir Agoes**, President of Bin Antarbudaya and CECF Partner in Indonesia
- **Wendy Zeilen**, Youth for Understanding (YFU)
- **Heather and Tom Deno**, Youth for Understanding (YFU)
- **Father Bill Au**, Pastor at Shrine of the Sacred Heart Church, Baltimore, Maryland

An around the world buffet with Asian, Mediterranean and Italian Cuisine was truly a feast. The final banquet was an amazing showcase of talent from these 32 countries. Participants shared original poetry, and traditional songs and dances (which in many cases, all were invited to learn and join in).

It was a time of celebration: celebrating everyone's uniqueness, celebrating the stereotypes and misconceptions that had been overcome, and celebrating the love and respect that was now shared





**"When we were all dancing together, all these people from all over the world looked like one big family. Our countries have borders, but our love doesn't."
-Moones, YES student, Libya**



There were hugs, pictures, and long goodbyes. The bonds created at BUBW Baltimore 2017 will last for many years to come. The participants left with a new perspective and opened hearts and spirits. More importantly, they left inspired and empowered to change their world.

