

## **My ODUMUN story: banging my head a few times**

*by Hiroko Kenner*  
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I found out about Old Dominion University's Model United Nations on my own. I had just transferred from Tidewater Community College with my Associate's Degree in General Studies into ODU's BA program in the fall of 2007. I was 21, working full time, living in a one bedroom apartment, and I was in my third year of college with just one credit short of being a junior. I was given a chart for my degree requirements from the ODU Registrar's Office and sent on my way to pick my first set of classes. I began looking for an interesting and seemingly easy six credits to fulfill due to my busy work schedule. Flipping through the ODU 2007-2008 course catalogue, I found a sequential course that was needed for my Bachelors degree in Political Science, and it fit my writing requirement. I signed up for POLS320W which was of course, *Model United Nations*. I always had a personal fascination in international issues so this course fit great with my minor which was international studies. A few months later, I became more involved in the Old Dominion Model United Nations than I ever thought I would be. Beginning with simple curiosity, I became consumed in the program by the end. The course filled my need for intellectual conversation about modern and global issues. But what I really ended up using the class and society for was to explore career opportunities in Foreign Service, project management, politics, and non-profit organizations.

My classes began in the fall semester and I was enrolled in the first MUN class. The instructor seemed very knowledgeable, yet slightly ostentatious. He was a very tall man with broad shoulders in his late twenties to early thirties and had a lazy eye. He claimed Boston, but I doubt he actually lived in Boston. I have become very aware through personal encounters that nearly everyone who lives within a 50 mile perimeter of the city tends to claim their origins from there. But, he was smart and working his way to earning his Doctorate and he was a good instructor for the course. His assignments were not difficult, but it did take time to research current events to talk about and to write country briefs. The syllabus was not too complicated and there were a few writing assignments, but nothing out of the ordinary for a college level writing class. We were to write case studies about countries of our choice. The object was to research and figure out what makes the country different from other countries and its influence on the global community. Regretfully, I never received an A for a paper, it was always a B.

The class was full of five to seven much younger know-it-alls. They were excited and talking about the positions they held as Model UNers in high school. It is possible that I just never found anything in high school to really get excited about, and felt a slight admiration. They were smart and very knowledgeable about global issues. This is something that I wanted. I wanted to be involved and I wanted to understand what was going on in the world.

I had no idea what simulations were or what they consisted of, so I sat quietly for most of the semester learning the basics of what the actual United Nations did, how it was structured, its

origins, theories of governance, and the many successes, and many more failures of it. That was the curriculum for the first half of the semester. We were tested on the titles, jobs, and responsibilities of the General Assembly and Security Council. In the last half we learned the rules of debate in the United Nations. This involves several customs including setting the topic for debate, setting the amount of time to debate and rebuttal, and how many questions can be asked of the speaker. We learned the formalities of addressing the speaker, the body, and the chair person. We learned how the United Nations debated and developed resolutions and we preformed simulations as ambassadors of United Nations member states. We debated on many silly things to warm up such as, how the world needs a global cupcake sale, global legalization of marijuana, nuclear proliferation. It was a great challenge to develop an opinion for things that I would not normally have an opinion about. I learned how to portray the disposition of what I thought the opinion of my State would be for a topic. Even if I knew absolutely nothing about Iran, for example, I knew that they generally opposed the opinions of United States. Therefore, if the United States favored something, I would object whole heartedly, and then tell why all other nations should agree with me. It became a game of mediation, negotiations, and resolutions. We continued mock simulations for the rest of the semester in order to prepare the class for the ODUMUN hosted United Nations Day that is held on campus and open to the community every October. It was mandated in our syllabus that we were expected to participate in UN day in order to pass the class.

United Nations Day is on October 24th. During this event, the ODU Model United Nations Society holds a large simulation open to the entire campus where students act as ambassadors of member nations of the UN General Assembly. Approximately 45 to 50 students attend dressed in western business attire or in traditional clothing of the country they represent. The students come prepared with several papers in their hands of their personal research to present modern global issues to the assembly. It is also the duty of the participating students to learn about the country that they will be ambassadors for and to present an accurate portrayal of their State's opinions. Students learn to gain support for their ideas and working papers by working within their country's regional trade blocks, alliances, and then to negotiate and gain votes for their working papers outside of their normal policies. Students are forced to strategize, communicate, write, and defiantly promote for their country's policies. The end result is a vote among the entire caucus to accept or reject the presented drafts. If unanimously approved the draft becomes a resolution. And in theory, the resolution gets passed onto the Security Council for review to carry out or modify. It is a great day to see how a simulation works. Participating students are given participation certificates, and the Chair of the committee issues awards to the students for example, best speaker. The simulation takes about five to six hours and most students are excused from missed classes because the simulation is a University sponsored event. This is the best training exercise for the students who may be interested in joining the MUN society or for those already in the society who want to learn officer positions and how to chair a committee.

For the rest of the semester, I chose to keep mostly to myself. I did however meet one of my closest friends in this class. She sat to my right, at the front, next to the door. We both preferred that because it provided the quickest escape after class. She was a Political Science major too, a couple of years older than me, and took the class as an elective. Her husband was enlisted in the Navy and she definitely played the role of the supportive young Navy wife, stating

intelligent and patriotic comments here and there when the subjects of war, or military, or U.S. involvement in foreign affairs were mentioned. She came very quick to find that she had no care for the class, the instructor, or the United Nations. I thought she was hilarious, not because she was suffering the whole semester, but because I thought most of the same about the student body in general. The difference was I kept my mouth shut and daydreamed instead while my friend huffed and puffed every few minutes because the instructor was always off topic or another student was talking to hear the sound of his own voice.

There was the trip to New York in November. It would be my first time to the Big Apple, and I would get to see the actual United Nations. This trip would indeed be one of the most memorable experiences for me. I thought this was the best part of the class. The University helped pay for the trip so the cost of travel and hotel was reduced to \$150.00 per student. This price included a room at the YMCA boarding house in Manhattan and a ride there and back on a charter bus. A few other students chose to compete in the U Penn MUN simulation, but the rest of us went to New York. We all gathered in front of the library very early one morning to board an old charter bus, and rode together for several hours, finally reaching the infamous view of the Jersey Turnpike, up through the tolls into the city, and finally through the traffic to our destination on West 63rd St. Our rooms were on two floors, and we all hiked up to our very tiny rooms with our assigned roommates. When the bedroom door opened it reached halfway across the room. There was a bunk bed, a small television on a dresser, poor fluorescent lighting, and a window with the view of the adjacent building's brick wall.

Although the accommodations were meager, I had the opportunity to experience not only walking through Times Square, and have wonderful food, but I would get to meet the ambassadors of Israel, Pakistan, and Palestine. I found these meetings most interesting. I cannot for the life of me remember the ambassador's names, but I remember comparing my views with these nations. It was hard for me to relate to their opinions on global issues such as national and global security and foreign trade and investments. I had developed strong American or Western views on these issues. Such opinions included the spread of Democracy and competition of an open market among many other issues. I found myself upset with the isolation that the average American is so obviously blinded and unaware of what is going on in the world. By the end of these interviews however, I remained solid with my convictions and was convinced that Pakistan, although a U.S. ally, had larger ulterior motives for its cooperation with the Western nations. I remember being disappointed that both nations of Israel and Palestine cancelled their meetings with us, but I found an upside to this. It would give me more time to explore the city. Not too long after the cancellation, however, we received notice that Israel changed their mind and was going to meet us at our originally scheduled time. Not less than five minutes after that, Palestine was back on the docket as well. Thus began our full day of lecture. Israel came in first. It was one guy, simple and calm, dressed in a gray suit and a Jewish cap. He explained his country's alliance with the Western nations and how each mutually benefitted. He explained how the country developed and mentioned that the land was given to them by God and it was taken away from them and given back in the late 1940's. The representative of Israel was very persuasive and it was easy for me to sympathize for the little Jewish man.

Then came Palestine, represented by two very tall and proud men in fine dark suits. I was blown away by how they knew exactly what was said by Israel. Immediately on the defensive, they countered every point made with more to enforce their views. They came off as aggressive.

But then again, their country was taken from them and given to their opposition, right? It was explained to us with charts and maps about the history and position of the Palestinians. I began to understand their frustrations especially with their PowerPoint of maps and historical boundary changes to explain their arguments. It was almost comical the way that they answered every question with an anti-Semitic answer. But, of course, it is not a laughing matter. These men were smart, on point and probably educated at Harvard.

After our break for lunch, we walked from the United Nations to the embassy of Pakistan. It was about a mile down the street and it was a relief to escape the drab conference room we were in all day. There were about twenty of us walking in a herd of suits and ties behind our instructor up the street for about a mile. We passed the Trump towers, Central Park, and several street vendors on our way. Finally, we approached the front doors of the embassy and walked through the double doors into a grand foyer. It was under construction at the time so it was dusty and there was scaffolding hanging from the cathedral ceiling, but the room was in fact pretty grand with gold plating everywhere and marble floors.

A man at a small desk in front of the door directed us to the right. We walked into a large conference room and there were two representatives sitting with our faculty sponsor having tea. Someone refilled their tea and quickly pushed her cart away as we entered the room. We sat around the large oval dark stained conference table and filled in the twenty or so black executive chairs, and thus began our question and answer period. The day was long - by then it was after five in the afternoon - and I know that everyone was getting antsy. I was grateful to be in the presence of high political figures, but I definitely lost focus by the end of that day. The only thing I can remember is a student asking something like, "So, how does your country feel about harboring terrorists?" There was a chilling pause. This question was highly inappropriate as it was just stated on the news earlier that week that Pakistan had agreed to mobilize their troops and participate in the American surge against the terrorists that were hiding in the foothills of Pakistan. My jaw dropped along with everyone else at the table. The five second pause felt like 30 seconds, and then the ambassador recomposed himself and clarified that they do not support terrorists or terrorism and it is condemned. He went on to explain some of the cooperation and initiatives that began with the western nations and the United Nations to combat terrorism. But, I just remember sitting there thinking again how dumb and inappropriate that kid was and how blind we are as a society to the issues outside of our country. The interview ended after about an hour and we all thanked the Ambassador.

There was plenty of time to explore the city. We all broke off into small groups to explore the city on our own and to return to our rooms when we wanted. I could not help but be the typical tourist who stares up at the sky all of the time. All I really needed was a Nikon around my neck and I would be the average Japanese tourist. The only rule for our adventures was to be business ready and in the lobby of the YMCA we stayed in by no later than 7:00 a.m. One of my favorite experiences was dinner in Little Italy. I had a wonderful dish with sausage in it and a great bottle of wine with my friend and a few classmates. Another night we explored Times Square. The view was unbelievable. There were massive buildings everywhere with thousands of colorful lights and advertisements. The streets were full of people handing out flyers and selling knock off handbags to tourists. This visit was in the middle of the writer's strike, so there were hundreds of people chanting for more pay and trying to rally support. China Town was not as nice looking as the one in San Francisco. This one was kind of dirty and eerie; I did not care

much for it. Before I knew it, the five day trip was over and the new spring semester was about to begin.

It was from this trip to New York where my heavy involvement with the society began to grow. I became an active member learning how to debate at the club meetings and volunteering my time to assist the officer's with small tasks like taking inventory of supplies. It was the end of the fall semester of 2007. I enrolled in the second course of the Model United Nations class titled POLS321W, and it was time for the MUN society to gear up for the spring 2008. This class was developed in collaboration with the Foreign Affairs lecture series. But, our responsibility that year was to help run and staff the Old Dominion University Model United Nations Conference at the Sheraton in downtown Norfolk. This was a huge learning experience. The objective of the second course was to teach the class the different positions needed in order to fill the dais in a committee. This included training the class as chairs, vice chairs, directors, and rapporteurs and the rules of debate.

Our class was used mostly as directors and rapporteurs. The rapporteurs do the roll call and update the speaker's list. The directors review working papers for spelling, grammar, format, and punctuation, etc. During the conference I rapporteured in the General Assembly; I cannot remember which committee. I do remember the students trying to develop a resolution to limit weapons in space. It was gratifying to assist the students, but I never felt the need to chair a simulation. It remained a calm semester, and I attended as many campus events sponsored by the Model UN as I could to show my support.

At the end of the semester it was time to vote for the following year's officer positions. Each member in the society was encouraged to apply. Considering the amount of time and effort I put in already, I figured I could definitely benefit in getting into the officer corps. I did not have enough experience to be the President, Secretary General, or Under-Secretary General, but I did have a background in handling money, so I applied for Secretary Treasurer. I was warned about how much work is actually involved. Ignoring the advice, I was voted in and accepted. I had no idea what the job really entailed.

The summer was a much welcomed time away. But the fall semester came more quickly for the MUNers than others. Several of us came in a couple of weeks early to learn our positions better and get organized before classes began. I still worked two part time jobs at this time and was a full time student. The officers were fiercely preparing for the events to come. Again in the fall, there was UN Day to prepare as well as competitions at the University of Pennsylvania and Georgetown. My responsibilities in the fall as the Secretary Treasurer were pretty lax. I had two Assistant Secretary Treasurers to help inventory everything in the office, from sales items to bundles of paper and computer equipment. We also helped arrange a few fundraisers. This semester went by faster than I could have imagined. Near the end of the semester it was time to gear up for the most challenging event, the high school conference.

This semester my role was completely different. It was the spring of 2009, and I was preparing to graduate in May. This semester I would be relied on for all financial matters, from collecting fees to resolving disputes in the accounting. My department also checked in all conference participants, prepared badges, verified country assignments and committees, managed sales, participation certificates and awards. There were several nights before the conference where we stayed up until 3:00 a.m. to meet deadlines. There were never-ending computer malfunctions, last minute committee and delegate name changes. We used a horrid

program called Microsoft Access to make name badges and certificates. I had to teach it to myself because no one else knew how it operated. I remember the night before the event banging my head a few times, wishing we had a laser jet printer for 800 name badges and certificates, and praying to God for patience and strength. We sat for hours watching documents print on a desk printer and watching Family Guy episodes on my laptop.

The next few days included nonstop aggravation. The first day of the conference began with faculty sponsors checking in. My department was responsible for verifying the amount of student, teachers, and staff were participating and to make sure the dues were collected as necessary and reporting to the Director. My staff set up tables that faced the door and preventing nosey people from walking in to see what was in our boxes and our computer screens. For several hours we settled accounts, corrected name badges and certificates, and documented every payment with signed receipts. We worked mind-numbing hours to make all of the changes and updates for the following day.

The following days continued in the following fashion. With endless interruptions it was nearly impossible to complete anything with several interruptions after another. I had to shut the double doors and lock everyone else out, but like a bad zombie movie people continued to peek through the crack looking for their prey inside, knocking over and over on the door. I did not see daylight for nearly 3 days. The days were a blur, and I blocked most of it from my memory to avoid post traumatic stress disorder.

My involvement in the Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society has been beneficial in numerous ways. For one, it looks fabulous on an academic transcript, and it is a great conversation starter with potential employers. I can tell them about the position I held, its responsibilities, and how I learned about setting goals, meeting those goals, and the successes that arose from meeting those goals and how that knowledge can be applied in their work environment. I can talk about learning to work well with all personality types and how to relate to others without sacrificing the overall goal. The challenges that I encountered taught me a lot about character, my ability to handle responsibility and to be diplomatic. ODUMUN can be beneficial to any student and can be used in as many ways: to gain knowledge of foreign affairs, to learn how to debate, to travel, to make great friends, to learn how to lead, and how to speak like a true politician.

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