

## A U.N. Journey into Global Action

September 23, 2011



*AU students Allie Cannington and Kerry Honeycutt, and AU alumni Erica Seng and Maya Aguilar, serve as official rapporteurs to the Secretariat at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (Photo courtesy of Maya Aguilar)*

*Representatives from the world's first virtual master's degree program focused on disability and public policy for Southeast Asia, sent a delegation to a United Nations conference devoted to the rights of people with disabilities.*

*From September 6 to 9 four representatives from the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) and the Center for Research on Collaboratories and Technology Enhanced Learning Communities (COTELCO) served as official rapporteurs to the conference, which COTELCO director Derrick Cogburn called the most important international gathering of people and organizations involved in the issue.*

[Allie Cannington, SPA '14, blogged from the U.N.](#)

### **My Experience at the United Nations**

“Nothing about us, without us” is a phrase I have heard since my life turned upside down. Born with a disability called brittle bones, I never identified with it until three years ago when I found myself head first into the disability rights community. Suddenly impassioned by the needs for equality for those with disabilities, I have not looked back.

The motto of the disability community — “Nothing about us, without us” — struck me as powerful, as the voices of people with disabilities are crucial to creating real social, political, and economic change. Yet, never have I seen the phrase reflect reality until my experience at the United Nations in New York City.

As an undergraduate student in the School of Public Affairs at American University, my studies and passion for disability rights intersect with my position as a research assistant at the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP)/COTELCO at [AU's] School of International Service. Watching the institute grow has been an incredible experience as I witness international cooperation and the power of virtual learning.

My work allowed me to join the delegation at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Representing American University and the IDPP, three colleagues and I were to serve as official rapporteurs to the Secretariat of the CRPD. As it has been my dream to witness and participate in disability rights on a global stage, I was beyond honored to attend.

Soon enough, I was wheeling through the doors of the United Nations, chills down my spine, holding back tears of excitement. Under the leadership of Derrick Cogburn, IDPP/COTELCO executive director, my colleagues and I recorded and summarized all main events of the conference.

I took in all components of the conference — international cooperation, leadership, civil rights advocacy, and diplomacy radiated [from] every minister, ambassador, state dignitary, and civil society representative present, just as it does on a smaller scale at American University.

The values that AU has instilled in me, particularly as a participant in the School of Public Affairs Leadership Program, shined as I witnessed history in the making. The CRPD is the first human rights convention of the twenty-first century; a milestone for disability rights to be seen as human rights.

Throughout the week, I honed in on networking opportunities and met global leaders. Hearing their stories of working toward equality, it dawned on me that I would not have the rights I have now without them, and I was reminded that I want to be this kind of leader. Although the CRPD exists, discrimination and stigma against those with disabilities continues across every corner of the world; there is much to be done.

Returning to AU, I cannot wait to venture into the next stage of my own disability and human rights advocacy. Through my academics, my job at the IDPP, and my presidency of the on-campus club, Disability Rights Coalition, I intend to advocate for progressive change: engaging the community to honor diversity and to emphasize the importance of dignity for all, especially those with disabilities. “Nothing about us, without us” will continue.

Source: <http://www.american.edu/americanoday/campus-news/20110923-COTELCO-UN-disabilities-CPRD.cfm#>