

New Orleans 2011

A colorful enrichment seminar ...



Rarely in our lifetime do we have the opportunity to share with such a colorful crowd as the one gathered in this Fulbright Seminar, as spring arises in New Orleans. Friends of emerging countries such as Turkmenistan, others from somewhat lacerated countries such as Bangladesh and delegates of emerging Asian economies like South Korea: around 70 countries are represented in this event by individuals whose common denominator is to come to the U.S. to pursue post-graduate studies. We come from the most varied professions, from Psychology to Microbiology, and gender equality is even arithmetic among the attendees.

The seminar "Greening the Planet: global challenges, local solutions" was organized by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State aiming to promote common understanding of environmental issues affecting our own countries. A comprehensive seminar brochure invites us to examine the theory and practice of environmental sustainability and its implications for infrastructure and transportation, scientific innovation, economic development and education. "In practice it is much more" says Kouassi Magnon, a Togolese student of economics at Southern Illinois University, who emphasizes with a strong hug the idea that in four days we can build fraternal bonds, despite the differences.

The seminar takes place at the beginning of Mardi Gras, a carnival whose purpose is to enjoy culinary and carnal pleasures before the beginning of the sacred days. Our version of this festivity is yet more academic as the close-fitting program includes lectures, volunteer work, debates, technical visits and little time for evening events in between parades. These days are dressed in gold, green and purple (the color of Mardi Gras), Creole-flavored and tuned by trumpets and jazzy melodies. The carnival has its origin in a rich mixture of those cultures which once settled in these lowlands: the French heritage is evident in the urban constitution of the French Quarter, the Spanish accent in their old plazas and the Haitian essence in the cadence of this land of hurricanes.

Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of the City of New Orleans, invites us in his inaugural speech to leave the academic accent of north -where most of us study- for more homely phrases as "awd its hot today, think

I'll go get me a snowball today f'sure". Landrieu, a charismatic individual recently elected, introduces us into a resurrecting city after Hurricane Katrina struck back in 2005: The hurricane touched Louisiana's coasts on August 29 with strong winds and an extraordinary storm surge, resulting in 2,000 casualties and losses of around 75 billion dollars. Katrina, a ubiquitous name in the everyday life of the city, is present in almost every activity within the seminar.

During a visit to Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood -once ravaged by the floodwaters of Lake Pontchartrain- we can see the outstanding work of the Make it right Foundation, once founded by Brad Pitt while filming The Curious Case of Benjamin Button in New Orleans. The little assistance to displaced families he saw while filming the movie impulsed him to form the institution. His team then invited the most prestigious architects of the world to develop special typologies for the houses to be built in flooded areas. After four years they have come to a solution in which the former inhabitants provide half the cost of the house and the foundation takes care of everything else, including the insertion to the labor market and network support. More than five years after the hurricane, dark-skinned angels roam in a playground that is wireless connected to other sites in the Netherlands and Spain (where they can actually interact using a screen, despite the language differences), while their parents watch them from the brand new balconies that resemble the traditional architecture of the State of Louisiana.

I had the chance to participate as speaker in the panel "Confronting Environmental Challenges in Home Countries". My speech was about the feasibility of extracting energy from a large tidal channel located at the south of Chile. Performing in front of an audience of 200 individuals of such diverse world views is in itself a great experience, even more if the subject is somewhat a technical engineering issue. A vertically flipped map of the world with Chile at the center served as a cornerstone for introducing the presentation, which emphasis was placed on the beauty of doing research in novel topics and on how a Fulbright experience can expand the horizons in these technical issues (in fact the best universities are in the U.S.) and in intellectual matters as well.

By late afternoon we joined numerous parades within the neighborhoods. Acrobats and clowns whipped up the crowd with necklaces and numerous presents. All of a sudden, the warm air and green avenues made me think of a dark skinned United States, a warm and joyful piece of country. Now that I'm at two thousand feet on a flight to the north I definitely feel the weekend in New Orleans is without doubt one of the best experiences of my life..



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