

## **My story of an inspirational visit to Buffalo United for Peace and Niagara University**

On April 3, 2024, I traveled to upstate New York from New York's JFK airport after a flight delay of over four hours because of poor weather conditions and airplane maintenance issues. The weather conditions did not affect the warm welcome that I received from my host for this visit, Professor Mustafa Gokcek, Chairperson of the Department of History at Niagara University located, near the US border with Canada. Professor Gokcek also serves as one of the leaders of the interfaith organization, Buffalo United for Peace.

I was invited to speak to his students at Niagara University on the development of the first medical science curriculum in the West which took place in Italy in the eleventh century at Monte Cassino monastery. This curriculum came to Italy from North Africa through an itinerant scholar named Constantine the African. It was the product of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars over two centuries beginning in Baghdad around the year 800 CE. It so happens that Niagara University has a wonderful Middle East studies program under the direction of Professor Gokcek and Professor Stephanie Wichhart. Both Professor Gokcek and Wichhart attended my lecture on Wednesday afternoon and took part in discussions with a diverse number of students including a woman who is a recent immigrant from Afghanistan. Professor Wichart directs the Soliya Connect program at Niagara University which allows students in the US to study online with students in the Middle East and Europe. This is the same program that I had directed for several years at San Jose City College in California. This kind of global dialogue is essential for a transformation of the present conflicts in our world to an era of cooperation and collaboration.

After my lecture and discussion at Niagara University, we traveled to downtown Buffalo where I gave a keynote presentation on the role of interfaith dialogue in combatting radicalization of youth in Kenya. Global Ministries University began an interfaith dialogue training program in 2012 at the request of officials with the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics based in Mombasa, Kenya. My talk was based on the collaboration of GMU with the Turkish Muslim organization in Kenya, Light Academy, which has developed many successful private schools with a strong emphasis on universal values and interfaith education. As a result of this program over the last decade, the number of incidents of interfaith conflict has decreased in the coastal region and led to the establishment of many other initiatives to combat radicalization of youth.

One of the components of the GMU training program was a focus on the Peace Clubs present in most schools in the coastal region of Kenya. One of our interfaith training classes had the student president of the Peace Club in Mombasa discuss the importance of the Peace Club for mitigating any tensions or conflicts within the schools located in central Mombasa. After my talk, I discussed the possible role of Peace Clubs in the secondary schools of the Buffalo region of upstate New York. The president of the Williamsville Central School District Board of Education, Doctor Swaroop Singh, was seated at the table with me. We discussed the possible role of Peace Clubs in the Buffalo region's secondary schools and his district.

Buffalo has many immigrants in its schools and Doctor Singh's Williamsville district has added four new holidays to its calendar, Diwali on November 1, Asian Lunar New Year on November 1, Eid al Fitr in April, and Eid al Adha in mid-June. The recognition of diverse ethnic and

religious communities in the Buffalo area provides an encouraging and inspirational message for my visit to Buffalo.

GMU will focus on the role of migrants and refugees in diverse areas of the world at our 2025 interfaith conference in collaboration with the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week and our partners in Kenya, Tangaza University Institute for Interreligious Dialogue and Islamic Studies, Harmony Institute of Kenya, and Globe Ethics in Geneva, Switzerland.

Buffalo United for Peace and Niagara University represent wonderful partners that GMU has found through its interfaith mission. We look forward to further collaboration with them in the future.

Gerald Grudzen, PhD  
President  
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