

## UN – REAL

My first view of the UN was on a Monday afternoon and I wasn't that impressed. The 63<sup>rd</sup> GA had just finished, the metal barricades were still (untidily) in place at the front, the flags of most nations hung limply on the poles and there was a small, dispirited demonstration by a group of Tibetans calling on Ban Ki-moon to do more to stop the torture of their people by the Chinese. It didn't feel particularly welcoming and there weren't the crowds of interested tourists that I expected. Even the guards didn't seem bothered with much. However, after being escorted by Joy, PBVM, to the Mercy Global Concern office and seeing the UN and the whole view from the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Church Centre Building my impression was completely reversed. I received a very warm and enthusiastic welcome by Deirdre and once she got talking (!) I couldn't help but get caught up in her passion and energy and in the excitement of just being here at the UN!!! In fact Deirdre claims that I've said either UNREAL or UNBELIEVABLE at least 20 times a day since I started working on the 1<sup>st</sup> October. The very first thing we did was to go over and get my special ECOSOC status card that enables me to walk into any of the UN buildings and attend most of the meetings that are held there. All the people I met couldn't believe that I was barely a day old and already had my pass. Another intern was so obviously green with envy because he'd been here since August and his director had yet to organize a pass!

So...what have I learned so far, and what stands out for me after "surviving" the first ten days?!

First: the language. I have stopped trying to work out the subtle differences between conventions and conferences, commissions and committees, working parties and task forces, high-level events and summits, resolutions and agreements, informal discussions, closed meetings, etc, etc. Second, the acronyms, (and I thought I had a good grip on more than just the basics like UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP, UNESCO, OAU, WFO, WHO, NGO, RUN, GA, SG) but the following were also being thrown around: CSD, CSW, CEDAW, FfD, ICERD, WGG, OHCHR, UDHR, GFMD, PRS, MDGs, JMP, ECOSOC... Then there are the buildings. The Ba'hai Centre (I refuse to spell it center!), the Church Centre (as distinct from the Episcopal Church Centre), one that is just called "211", Leo House, the ECOSOC Chamber, the many UN Conference Rooms...how was I ever going to remember where they all were? Then there are even the addresses like our own MGC office: the 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, of 777 UN Plaza on the corner of East 44<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Thank God numbers don't scare me too much!!! And, finally, of course, the many different people who I am being introduced to by Deirdre, some just on the street as we walk along, or in the cafeterias or at the meetings and briefings we attend. There are the supportive and helpful staff and maintenance workers of our buildings, and the members of the NGOs who occupy neighbouring offices: Amnesty International, The Burma Office, Women for Peace... And it was lovely to meet the only other Aussie around so far: Kevin Dance who is representing the Passionists.

Getting around New York City is much easier than I imagined and I praise God for the common sense minds that planned its streets and avenues and subway because even a directionally-challenged klutz like me has yet to get really lost here. Thankfully, New Yorkers are very friendly and don't mind pointing visitors in the right direction. Deirdre thoughtfully provided me with a small laminated map of Manhattan and once I understood 'uptown' and 'downtown' and the numbering of the 'east' and 'west' streets and their perpendicular avenues I was able to feel at ease in just wondering around and looking at all the amazing sights that are just around each corner and further down a block. The subway is a fantastic system and I have never had to wait more than five minutes for a train. When I went to see Ground Zero (very haunting and moving) last weekend I used the red, yellow, green and blue lines to get there and back home again! I easily walked 55 blocks that Sunday and must have climbed or descended hundreds of stairs.

I do have to admit that I felt very overwhelmed several times. There was an afternoon last week when Deirdre looked at me and said "What's wrong?" And it was simply that my head was spinning with all the information that it was receiving! Before I left Australia people kept asking me "What are you going to be doing at the UN?" and I had to say I didn't know but I jokingly added that I wanted to learn about how to get at all the pots of money that I knew were here for the people of Sudan. In her five years at the UN it is immediately obvious

that Deirdre has made invaluable connections with all sorts of people and at all levels. I have also seen how much she is able to do for our sisters and other people in the field because of these connections that she has. Through one of these connections next week I will meet Noelene Heyser who is head of the UN Bureau of the Asia Pacific and I know that this will be a useful and important introduction.

There are an unbelievable number of meetings being held each day. The daily journal of the UN lists them all, whether they are briefings, informal discussions, closed meetings... and needless to say it is impossible to go to all of them. Thursday mornings are the times for the Department of Public Information briefings and the two sessions I have attended thus far have highlighted the 'Rights of Older Persons' and 'Mental Health Issues'. These briefings, which most members of NGOs and religious Congregations attend usually involve a panel of speakers and then invite questions and comments from the floor. They are organized by NGOs that have a particular interest in an issue and obviously some are better organized and are more interesting than others. Anyone would do well to attend even just two meetings a day. One of the jarring aspects thus far is how so much of what is presented on general issues such as the rights of OPs and MH is from the perspective of North America and totally neglects the reality for the rest of the world, in particular, for the poorer developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and in many parts of Asia. I already know Deirdre could write volumes about this, and the complex politics involved, and especially about how important positions as chairs for committees and conferences are almost always given to North Americans.

After a few days I started to make a list of all the issues that are being addressed at the UN. I stopped at 30! Whilst I would love to be able to follow the latest on particular issues such as the Status of Women and Girls, the Elimination of Violence against Women, Global Climate Change, the Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Disarmament I soon realized that I'd end up going crazy. I had to choose, and that was something that I now remember Deirdre saying to me on the very first day. I have also appreciated the wisdom of Deirdre in recommending a "reading day" each week. There are so many documents, books, minutes, reports, etc that are sent on line or given as hard copies and it is important to filter through them so that what is relevant and important is digested!

Initially I decided to be part of the Working Group on Girls (WGG) as it is very active and specifically for the promotion of Girl-child education and I had an interest in Disarmament. However, after listening and talking to other sisters and interns and also realizing that my time here is an incredible opportunity to extend myself and learn about processes and matters that are not familiar to me I have decided to follow the issue of Sustainable Development. Deirdre accompanied me to the first meeting of the Committee for SD held just a few days ago and it soon became clear that it has had a bleak history. In-fighting between members made it ineffective for a long time and only at this meeting with all the old members long gone has there emerged the possibility for a new start and a re-visioned mandate for the committee to be drafted and discussed. I would love to be here longer so that I could be part of its new mission and vision.

Having mostly been "a hands-on" and "feet on the ground person" it is vital for me to better appreciate how influencing policy development and advocating for change where and when it is needed is as essential as the former and how they must work together. For me to be able to experience such high-level processes and decision-making is necessary for any work I will do in the future, even if they are painfully slow, bureaucratically complex and very much personally and politically motivated. This linking of theory with practice will enable me to better integrate both aspects of development work. Whilst we may not have many feet on the ground even now and as we get older and fewer in number I am realizing that advocacy may be all that we have in the future. I believe we will, as Sisters of Mercy worldwide, and because we now have the means to do so, need to establish better networks between us so that we can communicate clearly and easily the mercy and justice matters that need to be addressed. Had I known better what Deirdre and MGC was about whilst I was in Sudan and Uganda I would have "used" her more than I did and in doing so I know that both of our ministries and peoples associated with them would have benefitted greatly.

I sense that there is a much bigger role that MGC has to play in the life of each individual sister of Mercy and in our communities, locally and internationally. It has something to do with gathering as much information about the “heart of the matter” that touches the needs and lives of those with whom we work and doing more about using our mercy wisdom and common sense to bring the best possible solutions forward so that peoples’ lives all over our world have equal dignity, meaning and value. I pray that this ‘sense’ will become stronger so that the Kingdom of God will become a greater reality in our world. I thank God every morning when I wake up for this gift I have been given to be here through MGC at the UN and I especially want to acknowledge the support and encouragement I have received from my Congregation Leadership Team in Melbourne and from Nerida Tinkler at ISMA, and, of course, Deirdre Mullan! Thank you all.

I have quite a few bruises from pinching myself ... but this experience at the UN is very **REAL** and I pray that I can use it in all the best possible ways for the future in whatever work in which I am engaged. It is a very special time to be at the UN. This year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1948 it was an inspiring and visionary document. However, it is today, a document that still needs to be practically implemented for the well-being of billions of people in our world whose BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS are not being met. Ban Ki-moon writes that: “...it is our duty to ensure these rights are a living reality: that they are known, understood and enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.”