

# A Half Century of Citizen Diplomacy: A Unique Public-Private Sector Partnership

*Sherry Lee Mueller, Ph.D.*

President, National Council for International Visitors

## Introduction

One of the most dramatic and best publicized examples of citizen diplomacy in action was celebrated in August—the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to the Garst family farm in Coon Rapids, Iowa. The meeting of these unlikely friends was the result of what Roswell Garst called “full belly diplomacy.” He believed that people with a standard of living they wanted to protect would be less likely to go to war. Therefore, the United States had a vested interest in the success of Soviet agriculture. When Garst met a delegation of Soviet officials in Iowa touring farms in 1955, he realized that techniques he had developed on his 2,600-acre farm could improve productivity on large Soviet collective farms. When he applied for an export license for seed corn and agricultural equipment, he was met with skepticism by government officials who warned him he would not receive a warm welcome behind the Iron Curtain.

Garst promptly proved them wrong. Described as gregarious, expansive, and even “flamboyant,” he became something of an instant celebrity as he toured farms and gave lectures on increasing grain yields, so much so that he was unexpectedly invited to meet Premier Khrushchev himself; the two were said to have hit it off immediately. During the next four years Garst made two more trips to the USSR and hosted a number of Soviet agronomists in Iowa. Still, the announcement that Khrushchev would visit the Garst farm during his landmark trip to the United States in 1959—the first from a Soviet head of state—undoubtedly surprised many. But when one considers that Garst’s efforts helped to increase Soviet grain production substantially between 1956 and 1958, it is little wonder that Khrushchev was eager to see Garst’s operations for himself.

Garst’s belief, particularly prevalent during the Cold War and still valid, was that private citizens can build constructive relationships across international boundaries when governments are often constrained by official policies and historic precedents. Secretary of State Dean Rush echoed this notion at the 1965 NCIV<sup>1</sup> National Conference when he addressed community leaders from across the country who organized programs for foreign leaders in the US Department of State’s International Visitor Program:

“The government simply can’t do what you are doing. We cannot render that kind of individual, sensitive, and personalized service such as you can and do render in your own communities.”

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<sup>1</sup> The National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, was founded in 1961 as the National Council for Community Services to International Visitors (COSERV).

In the United States one of our fundamental cultural beliefs is that the individual has the power to make a positive difference—to be the impetus for change in various endeavors, from banning landmines to building relationships among leaders of various societies. Building constructive and enduring relationships among leaders across national boundaries is critically important because it is within that web of human connections that progress on urgent global issues, such as conflict resolution and pandemic infection prevention, occurs.

It is no surprise then that the idea of citizen diplomacy is deeply rooted in the United States. The mission of many nonprofit organizations to enable individuals to contribute directly to world peace, international understanding, and cooperation has produced an array of programs and projects that are genuine grassroots efforts to address common problems and build enduring connections among the people of various countries.

The National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), one of the pioneering organizations practicing citizen diplomacy, will mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a sequence of events and initiatives spanning the next two years. NCIV's half century of leadership in the field serves as a case study to explore citizen diplomacy, its relationship to public diplomacy, and its often underestimated, but nonetheless far-reaching, impact.

#### Citizen Diplomacy vis-à-vis Public Diplomacy

While the primary focus of this article is to describe one of America's most valuable public diplomacy programs and how its success hinges on the remarkable contributions of citizen diplomats, it is important to emphasize that, like the initiative of Roswell Garst, most citizen diplomacy activities extend well beyond public diplomacy programs.

Citizen diplomacy is the concept that, in a vibrant democracy, the individual citizen has the right—even the responsibility—to shape foreign relations, as some NCIV members express it, “one handshake at a time.” The term “citizen diplomacy” has been around for a long time. In fact, it predates the term “public diplomacy” (first coined in the 1960s by Ambassador Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School) which has received so much scrutiny in recent years.

President Dwight Eisenhower convened the White House Summit on Citizen Diplomacy on September 11, 1956. Acutely aware of the devastation and horrific costs of war, Eisenhower thought that peace was everyone's business. He stated:

“If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments—if necessary to evade governments—to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other.”

The international exchange organizations, People to People International and Sister Cities International, were established as a result of this historic gathering. These organizations are still active today coordinating exchange programs and humanitarian projects around the world.

Programs like these are what usually come to mind when citizen diplomacy is mentioned—privately funded international exchange activities such as sending a student abroad on an Experiment in International Living summer program, hosting an AFS student, going overseas to live with a family as part of a Friendship Force delegation, or participating in a Partners of the Americas development project. Whether guests or hosts, exchange program participants embody citizen diplomacy.

While such programs are at the heart of citizen diplomacy, the term encompasses so much more. In 1958 when Elvis Presley landed in Germany wearing his army uniform, he told reporters that “what we do here will reflect on America and our way of life.” When one thinks about Elvis, citizen diplomacy does not leap to mind. Yet he clearly was conscious of the fact that he had a responsibility to put his country’s best foot forward as he interacted with foreign nationals.

Whether one is a rock star, athlete, student, tourist, or business representative, each of us should be aware that our actions shape foreigners’ impressions of our country and ultimately shape their decisions affecting America’s security and prosperity. This awareness that our behavior matters as we go about our daily activities is the essence of citizen diplomacy.

Over the years the number of organizations that include citizen diplomacy in their names, mission statements, and programs has multiplied. For example, five NCIV community members use the term in their names, with the Utah Council for Citizen Diplomacy leading the way.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, citizen diplomacy is continuing to gain attention, finding its way into more public speeches, legislation, and “smart power” discussions. One major reason for this is the sequence of events triggered by 9/11 and the severely tarnished American image around the world that generated alarm from Main Street to Madison Avenue.

In March 2004, a group of concerned leaders, primarily heads of exchange organizations, gathered at the Johnson Foundation Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. During a three-day forum, participants debated how to expand exponentially the number of Americans engaged in citizen diplomacy, recognize the accomplishments of outstanding citizen diplomats, and identify new public and private resources for international exchange and development programs. They decided to convene a national summit and to urge local leaders across the country to do the same—convene the heads of organizations and agencies with international missions in their communities and organize community summits on citizen diplomacy.

To date, two National Summits on Citizen Diplomacy have taken place. The first preceded the Sister Cities Conference in 2006; the second preceded the NCIV National Conference in February 2008. More than 70 community summits from Miami to Seattle have also taken place. Participants searched for ways to create synergy among their organizations, increase global literacy, and publicize opportunities to serve as citizen diplomats.

President Obama's emphasis on the importance of public service has also added momentum to the citizen diplomacy movement. Citizen diplomacy organizations offer many ways to serve our communities, our country, and our fragile planet. A coalition of organizations spearheaded by the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy, founded in 2006 in Des Moines, Iowa, is urging President Obama to convene another White House Summit on Citizen Diplomacy.

### NCIV and the IVLP

Many define public diplomacy as the efforts of a government to influence public opinion abroad—particularly the opinions of perceived decision makers. US public diplomacy encompasses many information activities, ranging from Voice of America broadcasts to the live Web chats sponsored by the State Department's Alumni Affairs Office. It also includes a panoply of international exchange programs, ranging from the Department of Defense International Military Education Training Program to the Fulbright Program sponsored by the US Department of State. Some State Department programs are dependent on public-private sector partnerships and the unique combination of public and private funding, manpower—including essential volunteer labor—and collaboration that characterize this creative administrative arrangement.

A Congressional appropriation funds the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).<sup>2</sup> The State Department selects and orients the foreign leaders who participate in the IVLP, but department officials work closely with their private-sector partners—NCIV members—to design national itineraries and custom tailor each program to the group or individual's professional and cultural interests.

The overarching goals of the IVLP are to enable visitors to develop more nuanced and realistic views of the American people, our history and heritage, and to facilitate professional dialogues among foreign leaders and their US counterparts.

Through a cooperative agreement with the US Department of State's Office of International Visitors, NCIV administers a grant program enabling its community-based members to carry out these activities. For each federal dollar received, NCIV members raise six dollars locally to support their work with the IVLP. This does not include the in-kind contributions or the value of volunteer efforts; it is estimated that more than 80,000 volunteers are involved in NCIV network activities each year. They serve as professional resources, board members, home hosts, drivers, volunteer programmers, financial contributors, and office volunteers.

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<sup>2</sup> The appropriated base budget for 2008 was \$77,621,000, and increased to \$79,211,000 in 2009.

While the numbers are impressive they are only part of the story. The high caliber of these volunteer citizen diplomats is key to the program's long-term success. Ambassador Andrew Young volunteers for the Georgia Council for International Visitors; Dr. Joseph Shirley, President of the Navajo Nation, is a volunteer for the Albuquerque Council for International Visitors. Ambassador Mary Kramer, recently inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame and a member of the Council of American Ambassadors, serves on the board of the Iowa Council for International Understanding (ICIU), NCIV's member in Des Moines. Ambassador Kramer and her husband served as home hosts before her tenure as ambassador, and now continue to do so. Reflecting on service as both an official diplomat and a citizen diplomat, Ambassador Kramer remarked:

“After living overseas, you come to understand that people have an important role in diplomacy, whether they are aware of it or not. Organizations such as the ICIU and NCIV are an essential part of US public diplomacy. I saw firsthand how visitors returned home with much greater appreciation of the United States and its ethnic, geographic, and political diversity—as well as its democratic institutions.”

Firsthand encounters with citizen diplomats trump grim headlines and stereotypical sound bites. An Albany volunteer offered this description of his family's experience hosting a delegation from Uganda capturing the impact of citizen diplomacy:<sup>3</sup>

“These visits are worth gold to US public diplomacy. Not only do they allow for visitors to meet their peers in the United States (and hopefully remain in touch with many of them) and gather important professionally relevant information they can take home, the IVLP is also an important way for Americans to meet people from parts of the world they are unlikely to visit themselves. The US population remains woefully uninformed about international affairs and this has serious implications for foreign policy and funding for foreign assistance—as well as the ability of Americans to appreciate and participate in globalization. The IVLP makes these issues less a matter for *The New York Times* and more a conversation over a dinner table, a small meeting in an office, and a friendship begun that might last for decades. Yes, high-level diplomacy has its place and it requires trained professionals to carry it out. But it must be buttressed by the engagement of non-professionals who can meet and exchange views in informal settings that defuse the intense politics that often dominate official meetings. US foreign policy cannot live on Track II diplomacy alone, but it also can't live without it. As the conversations over my dinner table last week proved, serious issues can be addressed in informal venues and all involved are the better for it. Citizen diplomacy is good for diplomacy—and for the citizens who engage in it. This is quiet and unheralded work but it deserves the continued (and increased) support of the US government.”

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://globalengagement.foreignpolicyblogs.com/2009/08/31/track-ii-diplomacy-alive-and-well/>.