

CSI student turns childhood experiences into ambition

By [Melissa Davlin Times-News writer](#) [Magicvalley.com](#)

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College of Southern Idaho student senator Sayid Abdullaev pauses from his work Monday. Abdullaev, who grew up in Kyrgyzstan, is trying to start a nonprofit organization to benefit youth from ethnic minority groups.

(JUSTIN JACKSON/Times-News)

At 10 years old, when he told a neighbor that he wanted to be president of his country, the man flatly denied his dream.

You can't be president, Abdullaev recalled the man saying. Your family is too poor, too Uighur.

Ten years later and half a world away, Abdullaev is proving that cultural background and economic hardships don't have to be barriers to success. The 20-year-old College of Southern Idaho communications and political science student travels the world speaking at conferences, including the United Nations International Day of Peace in September, and is working on setting up a nonprofit organization.

Abdullaev is Uighur, an ethnic group that is mostly centered in western China. He grew up with his mother, father, grandmother and older brother in Karakol, Kyrgyzstan, where Uighurs are a minority group. Kyrgyzstan, between Kazakhstan and China in central Eurasia, is a developing country, but "compared to the places I've been to, I've traveled to, I'm very blessed," Abdullaev said. "We have running water, we have electricity."

Still, the country's services were lacking, and Abdullaev was tired of waiting for changes. In 2000, at 10 years old, Abdullaev started a group called Kids Helping Kids, an organization to increase access and opportunities for Kyrgyz children with disabilities. Since its inception, Kids Helping Kids has put on summer camps, Christmas parties and field trips for its participants.

That was only the beginning. With the help of his older brother, who paid for his English textbooks, Abdullaev started traveling to conferences. International organization Three Dot Dash chose him as one of 30 global teen leaders for its 2008 conference.

Also that year, Abdullaev studied abroad in Tucson, Arizona. In 2009, after a friend's account of studying in Idaho, Abdullaev returned to the U.S. to enroll at CSI.

In the past two years, he has been recognized by international organizations such as Jane Goodall's Global Youth Summit, the United Nations, Lehigh University's Iacocca Institute in Pennsylvania and Miracle Corners of the World for his involvement in Kids Helping Kids and other groups. On Sept. 21, he spoke at the UN's International Day of Peace.

"It's just really helped me to see what young people do around the world," Abdullaev said.

Last week, Abdullaev was supposed to go to New Delhi, India, for an Oxfam International conference. His visa didn't come through in time, though, so he had to miss his flight.

To make him feel better, his friends — including CSI student body president Sheree Haggan — held a party for him last Sunday.

He's bitterly disappointed about missing the Oxfam conference, for which he spent eight months preparing, but he's trying to focus on the future. His biggest goal of the moment: Starting his own nonprofit called Youth for Peace. Once he gets nonprofit status, he said, he'll start applying for grants that will help him build community centers for youth of minority groups in central Asia — kids who experience discrimination, like he did. Eventually, he would like to expand the organization internationally.

CSIDean of Students Graydon Stanley said Abdullaev's energy is overwhelming. When Abdullaev first started attending CSI in 2009, he immediately made his presence known. The first week of school, "he kept showing up and volunteering at every event we had," Stanley said. "It was so cute."

Sometimes, Stanley isn't sure about some of Abdullaev's plans. College kids often have good intentions, he said, but sometimes their plans are unrealistic or get overwhelmed by everyday life.

Not Abdullaev, though.

"He'll bring up something that he wants to do, and I'll think, 'Yeah yeah, OK,'" Stanley said. "And the next thing you know, he's doing it." (Writing to U.S. senators and tracking down a fee waiver for the New Delhi trip, for instance.) If Abdullaev comes across obstacles, he overcomes them.

“He’s doing something week in, week out,” Stanley said.

And not all of his efforts are international. Abdullaev heads the Sustainability Council on the CSI campus and has succeeded in getting faculty and staff involved with the student group.

“This is typical of Sayid,” Stanley said. “He’s a bridge builder.”

Abdullaev hopes to tell other youth that they can make positive changes in their communities, too.

“Young people, they have all these ideas, but they don’t know how to implement ideas into reality,” he said. “I just want to show that young people are not only the future, we’re also the present. And therefore, we have to be involved. We don’t have to wait for anyone or anything, but we have to act today.”

Melissa Davlin may be reached at 735-3234 or mdavlin@magicvalley.com.