



## Minneapolis & Tours Blog

*A friendship between the cities of Minneapolis & Tours*

### Minneapolis Hosts Sister Cities International Conference in July

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Friday's flag ceremony during the Sister Cities International Conference in Minneapolis

For three days in July, Minneapolis welcomed visitors from around the world for the 59<sup>th</sup> annual Sister Cities International Conference. As a board member for Minneapolis and Tours Sister Cities, I was fortunate to be able to attend this celebration of global connections. For me, the conference began with a volunteer stint as an airport greeter near the baggage claim in Terminal 1 on Thursday morning and, between all of the inquiries for the nearest restroom, I directed the arriving attendees to the light rail or airport shuttle and reminded them of the city tours going on that afternoon if they were interested in sightseeing.

At the VIP Reception on Thursday night at Orchestra Hall, I talked with Delores Strand from Columbia Heights, who is one of the Minnesota State Coordinators for Sister Cities International. Among their various duties, state coordinators provide insight and advice for parties interested in establishing a sister city relationship. I also chatted with Ron Nirenberg, a San Antonio city council member running for the Sister Cities International Board of Directors, and told him of my love for the history of the Alamo and surrounding area.

For many, it was clear the highlight of the conference was the parade of flags at the opening ceremony on Friday. Young people from local Boy and Girl Scout troops, as well as some from a visiting delegation from Tours, marched onto Peavey Plaza holding high flags from sister cities

around the world, producing a spectacle of color under a bright blue sky. Speeches by various dignitaries and a proclamation by Governor Mark Dayton designating Friday “Sister Cities Day” in Minnesota were periodically interrupted by the “ping” of kids dropping their metal flag staffs onto the brick pavers.

After the ceremony, attendees returned to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Minneapolis to cool off (seats in the shade were in high demand for the flag ceremony as the morning started off hot and humid) and grab their box lunches for a keynote luncheon address by former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura. Proclaiming that “Maybe we should leave the foreign policy to you all instead of who we got in Congress,” he added his endorsement for the work sister cities do and encouraged everyone to “get to know people as people” and not be influenced by the media. As he now lives “off the grid” in Mexico part of the year, he also discussed his experience in a foreign country and assertion that everyone should spend some time being in the minority, joking that he is a GWOP- a “gringo without papers.”

Attendees could pick from a variety of breakout sessions on Friday afternoon, including those preparing for travel exchanges, insight into nonprofit governance and a roundtable about sports and diplomacy. The official welcome reception at the Nicollet Island Pavilion on a picturesque summer evening capped off the day, showcasing a variety of Minnesota food and beverages from roasted corn on the cob and walleye to locally produced craft beers. (When people saw I was from Minneapolis on my nametag on Saturday morning, they came up to me and raved about the food and gorgeous views of the river and downtown at the reception.)

I was excited to hear the conference was coming to Minneapolis as that meant I could commute from my house to the conference sessions, although Saturday began inauspiciously as an overnight storm had knocked out power to my house. Oh well, I left a few things melting in the freezer and enjoyed a breakfast keynote roundtable of diplomats representing Japan, Canada and Mexico, all of whom discussed the importance of business trade and economic development in our increasingly interconnected world.

As with most conventions, one of the most beneficial aspects is just being with people who are doing what you are doing and the ability to exchange ideas and best practices. I learned about the different structures of sister city relationships and funding models at Saturday afternoon’s fundraising roundtable and talked with people from as close as Wisconsin to as far away as Nairobi, Kenya.

Minnesota was well-represented at the annual awards dinner on Saturday night, as Columbia Heights was honored for having the best overall program for a population less than 25,000 in their relationship with Lominski, Poland and Duluth Sister Cities was honored with the Innovation: Humanitarian Assistance award for a population less than 100,000 for their work with at-risk children and families in Petrozavodsk, Russia.

Rudy Maxa, the award-winning travel writer and St. Paul resident, gave the keynote address during lunch on Saturday and highlighted the juxtaposition of an area called the “Twin Cities” against how hesitant people sometimes seem about journeying to “the other city.” “They are

perfectly happy to hop on a plane and fly to Paris but at times have been known to squawk, ‘You mean I have to go all the way over to St. Paul??’”

Speaking with a woman from Virginia afterward reinforced that this sentiment may be universal – she said people in her organization have been known to remark “I have to go all the way to Maryland” even though the actual distance is only about ten miles. Maxa also shared one of his favorite travel related quotes from none other than Britney Spears: “The coolest thing about being famous is traveling – I love traveling overseas, like to Canada and stuff.”

Seriously though, along with the obligatory jokes about how far I had to travel to attend, being involved with this conference reminded me to turn off the soundbites and step off the beaten path to discover a world of likeminded people interested in sharing their culture and traditions with anyone willing to listen.