

Strength through Diversity:

Creating an Open, Welcoming Community in Salt Lake City

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Embracing diversity means opening our hearts, souls, and minds to the experiences, customs, and life stories of others. We are each more understanding, more compassionate, and more enriched when we truly come to know others who are different—come to know them as wonderfully different brothers and sisters.

Diversity means strengthening and enriching our communities—and our own personal lives—by bringing people of different backgrounds together in shared purpose. Diversity means living each day of our lives with a commitment to looking outside of the limited sphere of our individual experiences to the insights, struggles, and wisdom of others. To embrace diversity is to value the richness and vitality of our varied world.

As people committed to a just society, we seek diversity to right historical wrongs, to extend opportunities to marginalized groups, and to encourage a culture that recognizes the common humanity in, and precious uniqueness of, every human being. We recognize that fostering the inclusion of diverse experiences, practices, and ideas in every decision-making process, workplace, and social institution makes us, our organizations, and our nation more capable, effective, and robust. And we work, full of hope, toward a society where each person feels naturally drawn to those of divergent backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultural understandings, seeking to bridge and cherish differences that might otherwise become divides.

We can look to nature as a guide for the critical importance and central place of diversity in the well-being of our society and in our own individual quality of life. Biologists see individual species as members of large, ecosystem-wide systems. The unique role and particular features of each species ensures that other,

different species may live and thrive. As the late evolutionary biologist Steven J. Gould once wrote, “If nature teaches us any lesson, it loudly proclaims life’s diversity.”

Just as the biodiversity of the earth ensures the possibility of life for each individual species, and provides for adaptability in ever-changing global conditions, the diversity of human society allows businesses, organizations, and government to be responsive to external changes and social developments. Just as the biodiversity of the earth enlivens the fabric of ecosystems and living networks, the diversity of our nation and our local communities enriches the character of our everyday lives, opening up new opportunities for growth and development. As we have a profound responsibility to exercise stewardship over our natural environment and protect the biodiversity of nature, so too do we have a deep obligation—and fantastic opportunity—to foster diversity throughout all areas of our lives, our economy, and our world.

While achieving and valuing diversity is a social goal, it can only be achieved through persistent individual endeavors. Advocating for diversity in the spheres of politics and public policy is empty without personal efforts to form human connections with those of different ethnicities, customs, and modes of understanding. We say we value diversity and seem to embrace it in our lives. But how many of us have had people over to our homes for dinner during the last six months whose backgrounds differ fundamentally from our own? How many of us have contributed our time, talents, and resources to organizations that represent diverse communities other than our own—communities with their own individual struggles for equality, justice, and recognition?

Two years ago, when forming a book club, I sought out people whose backgrounds and life experiences differ substantially from my own. Members of my book club include a native of Zimbabwe; a white, lesbian lawyer; a female Hispanic educator; a white, female philosophy professor; a white, male Catholic physical therapist; a female, Italian Catholic economic development specialist; a white, ex-Mormon, female playwright, documentary filmmaker, and anti-nuclear activist; a white, male advertising executive; a lesbian rabbi (yes, in Salt Lake City!); a first-generation college graduate from a working class background, now Dean of the University of Utah College of Humanities, who grew up Jewish but has fallen away from the faith; and, of course, me, a white, ex-Mormon recovering lawyer and soon-to-be recovering politician.

The book club has provided so many more interesting, enriching experiences than if it were comprised entirely of men, or of people from similar social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. In our monthly gatherings, we bring so many diverse experiences, viewpoints, and life stories to a common project—reading the same book—and benefit tremendously from the widely varying interpretations, insights, and values we share with one another.

Like a book club comprised of people with unique and widely varying life stories, a community is sustained by the diverse, unique experiences and contributions of its members. Maintaining a successful, thriving community requires that we unite in common cause, in pursuit of our common values, while incorporating and respecting the valuable perspectives each one of us brings to the table. We can achieve little without the insights and creativity that our differences make possible. We can hope for so much when we bring people from all backgrounds and all walks of life together, listen to one another, and work together toward the greater good as we get to know, appreciate, and truly love one another.

Out of strong appreciation for the value of diversity in the workplace, in the community, and in our nation, we have worked tirelessly under the motto of “Strength through Diversity” to foster diversity and respect in Salt Lake City. Soon after taking office, I issued an executive order that implemented a full-fledged affirmative action program in city government hiring, requiring that all departments in City government recruit, hire, train, retain, and promote qualified individuals who add to the diversity of our work force. We tenaciously promote diversity as a high priority, and formally review our efforts to hire and retain diverse employees at quarterly Cabinet meetings.

Over the past seven years, the City has seen remarkable growth in the diversity of our workforce. When I took office, in January 2000, people from ethnic minority backgrounds comprised 10.7% of our city employees. Our administration has since increased the diversity of the City’s workforce by over 25%. Not only is Salt Lake City government increasing the diversity of its workforce as a whole, we are also finding great success in fostering diversity in better paying, more prestigious administrative and professional positions. The percentage of employees from the ethnic and minority community in professional positions in Salt Lake City government has increased by 37%, and the number of people from ethnic minority communities who are administrators in Salt Lake City government has increased by over 52%. Of my new appointments to City boards and commissions, over one-third have been from the ethnic minority community.

We have achieved this enormous increase in diversity in City government by constantly keeping the issue of diversity in front of us. For instance, I know precisely, each time a recommendation is made for an application to a board or commission, what level of diversity we have achieved in each board and commission for the current year and for the almost eight years I have been in office. If we truly value diversity, we must do all we can to achieve it—and make it a priority every day of our lives.

Good governance is in large part governance by example. Good public policy implemented by one agency can raise awareness and spur similar efforts within a large organization or among other external organizations. In recruiting a diverse workforce, we aim to enhance our effectiveness, to extend employment opportunities to those from historically marginalized communities, and to set a good example for the rest of City government and the community as a whole.

To guarantee basic rights and respect for all City employees, I signed an Executive Order early in my term prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or disability. This Executive Order was recently codified by the City Council as an ordinance. We also instituted mandatory training for all City employees in diversity awareness, so that every City employee understands the value of diversity to Salt Lake City, and gains greater awareness of actions that promote acceptance, understanding, and collaboration between people of different backgrounds—as well as actions that impede these goals.

We can learn so much about the value of diversity from the experiences of our City employees. For example, Tat'yana Koshevaya is a graduate of the Russian Institute of Foreign Language and a recent emigrant to the United States. She started off as a volunteer at the Gallivan Center—a premier performance space for City-sponsored concerts and other events—and was subsequently hired part-time. Starting next month, she will be joining the City as a full-time employee assisting the Gallivan Center and the Public Services Department's Diversity Committee with outreach to our diverse communities. Tat'yana's experiences as an immigrant and a native speaker of a language besides English will be a valuable resource for the City's efforts to communicate and build stronger relationships with members of ethnic minority and refugee communities.

Any lasting, systemic shift toward greater diversity in a workplace cannot be achieved solely on the basis of efforts in hiring and recruiting. Bringing people from widely diverging backgrounds together in common purpose requires a

transformation of underlying attitudes of prejudice and fear. Diversity in the workplace or in the community is of little value if people feel marginalized, disempowered, and disinclined to contribute their views and talents because of discrimination or a lack of understanding on the part of others.

Diversity, in short, is not simply about percentages. Rather, it is about cultivating attitudes of respect, mutual understanding, and peace between people who differ greatly from one another. Diversity is not simply a characteristic of an institution, but a way of being that permeates an entire group of people.

Working to create a culture of diversity in our city, we recently revamped our Office of Minority Affairs into the Office of Diversity. Central to the Office of Diversity is the Kaleidoscope Program, which is based on the recognition that, just as any object is beautiful when viewed through a kaleidoscope, so all City residents are worthy of respect and appreciation no matter their color or shape, no matter their ethnic or religious background, physical abilities, gender, or sexual orientation. Leadership training for members of our diverse communities is a central aspect of the Kaleidoscope Program. We have developed a Speakers Bureau of leaders in our diverse communities, who visit our schools and serve as role models for students. The Speakers Bureau also reaches out to civic, business, and social organizations to foster an appreciation of diversity as an invaluable benefit to our community and as a matter of personal and organizational responsibility.

Through the Kaleidoscope Program, Salt Lake City government will inspire members of our diverse communities to become leaders in government, business, and social life. We will also help foster a community-wide appreciation for the valuable contributions members of our diverse communities can make for the benefit of our entire community, given enough encouragement and appreciation.

The Office of Minority Affairs has also assisted in forming a Refugee Working Group, comprised of State, County, and City agencies, service providers, and a large contingency of refugees. The group works to meet the critical needs of our many refugees while empowering members of the refugee community to assume leadership roles, learn organizing skills, and communicate their views to service providers and elected officials.

We can learn so much from the experiences of refugees who choose to make their homes in our communities. Refugees show incredible resilience and community-mindedness in resettling in a foreign land, and enrich our lives with

their experiences and insights. Tim Saka is a refugee from Russia of Turkish descent, who recently settled with his family in Salt Lake City. As he noted, “Once we get settled in, move into our homes, enroll our children in our schools, and start going to church and learning about our new community—we are no longer refugees. We just want to be treated and considered a part of our larger community.” Making certain that everyone has a place at our community table—that everyone is welcome and valued in our communities—is fundamental to what the word “community” really signifies.

We have endeavored to foster mutual understanding and an appreciation of religious diversity through our Bridging the Religious Divide program. Following a contentious dispute surrounding the sale of a block of our Main Street to the LDS Church, which bitterly divided Salt Lake City along religious lines, I launched Bridging the Religious Divide, which brought our community together in frank, open, mostly respectful, and friendship-building dialogue. More than six hundred people participated in the first phase of the program, a series of three public forums. The program’s second, small group phase gave fourteen groups of eight to twelve people the opportunity to discuss religious divisions in our community, often while breaking bread together, and to explore ways these divisions might be overcome. These efforts continue to this day among several smaller, nonprofit organizations who were inspired by the City’s efforts.

We also encourage cross-cultural understanding and friendship among our many diverse residents by providing beautiful, vibrant community spaces and dynamic civic events. Our world-class City Library, now the second most-visited attraction in Salt Lake City, brings people together for participation in City government-sponsored forums, film festivals, and other artistic and cultural events. Salt Lake City government directly sponsors or has a critical role in helping plan and facilitate numerous cultural festivals, such as Juneteenth, the Iranian Norooz (New Year) celebration, the Japanese Obon Festival, the Living Traditions Festival, Cinco de Mayo, and Mexican Independence Day. Great civic spaces and festivities provide people of diverse backgrounds the opportunity to understand the cultural backgrounds and life stories of others, and can be the rich soil of friendships and collaborations.

Salt Lake City is dynamic, open, and welcoming to people from all walks of life, as never before in our history. According to US Census data, the Latino population in Salt Lake City almost doubled from 1990 (9.7%) to 2000 (18.8%). Taken together, Asians, African-Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders comprise 27.5% of the city’s total population. When one factors

in people reporting two or more races or some other race, nearly 40% of Salt Lake City's population originates from a diverse background. According to the *WOW Facts 2007* publication, a valuable resource for those concerned about creating a diverse community, Utah has the seventh largest Pacific Islander population and Latino population in the United States, per capita.

Understanding the tremendous contributions of our immigrant populations, comprised mostly of hard-working, good family-oriented, law-abiding people, we can, and must, join together and insist that Congress finally do its job and enact reasonable, fair, and compassionate immigration law reform that will conform our laws to our long-time practices and lead to conforming our practices to our nation's laws.

In the meantime, we can facilitate greater understanding and compassion regarding the plight faced by immigrant workers and their families in our country. A few years ago, the Justice Department ("Justice" being a misnomer in this instance) obtained indictments against working men and women, mostly Hispanics, who were working at the Salt Lake City International Airport and who did not have valid immigration documentation. A raid by the INS ensued and several people were incarcerated and faced federal criminal prosecution and deportation. I formed a Family-to-Family program, which demonstrated the enormous value of people gaining empathy through getting to know each other. We matched long-time local families, mostly White, with families of those arrested at the Airport. Poignantly, members of those local families were moved, many of them to tears, when they met the families whose lives had been turned upside-down by the arbitrary enforcement of immigration laws. Wonderful friendships developed and, through the program, many of our long-time residents learned a great deal about the difficult situation facing millions of hard-working, peaceable immigrants in our country.

Gays and lesbians also face horrendous discrimination in our country. Salt Lake City has a sizeable, critically important gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. Because of proactive measures we have taken, Salt Lake City received honorable mention in Gregory Kompes's 2005 book *50 Fabulous Gay-Friendly Places to Live*. Promoting acceptance for people of all sexual orientations has been a major focus of our administration. I signed an executive order extending employment benefits to domestic partners of City employees. I have called for greater awareness of HIV/AIDS testing in Salt Lake City, and invited members of the media to accompany me to my AIDS test to give needed publicity to the issue. We also organized a Freedom Forum on adoption, entitled

“Freedom to Adopt,” which provided for thoughtful dialogue on the right of gay and lesbian parents to adopt children. I have been privileged to serve as the Grand Marshal of the Pride Parade, and proudly fly the Rainbow Flag over City Hall during the festivities. In November 2005, I was honored to be named one of the top ten straight advocates for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender equality by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

The future of Salt Lake City as a diverse community looks incredibly bright. Ethnic minorities make up 53% of the students enrolled in our Salt Lake City schools. Over 36% of students served by the district are learning English as a second language, and over 100 languages are spoken. Our students and young people from diverse communities, due to their unique experiences and insights, have tremendous potential for solving the great social, economic, and sustainability challenges we face as a community and nation.

I applaud the work of Diversity Best Practices and of all the attendees at this conference in encouraging diverse workplaces, communities, and public policies. While fostering diversity is an enormous, critically important goal for our entire nation, it can only be fostered through our individual actions and choices—through the gestures of peace, friendship, and love we extend to our fellow citizens. Diversity implicates not simply the composition of our labor force but the fabric of our daily lives. Working together, we can foster a more open, welcoming, and fair society.