TED TALKS COME TO TASHKENT
FOR THE FIRST TIME

The U.S. Embassy Alumni Programs Unit teamed up with five alumni to organize the first-ever TEDx event in Uzbekistan. The conference entitled TEDxMustaqillikSquare took place at Ilkhom Theatre on February 26, 2017 sparking interest in public discourse and providing a platform for incipient events of a similar format in a country where such programs are yet to emerge.

Driven by their exchange experience and inspired by TED projects across the globe, organizers took the initiative to launch the debut project in Uzbekistan.

About TED
TED is an American nonprofit organization devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks of 18 minutes or less. To date, TED talks cover a range of topics – from science to business to global issues – in more than 110 languages. The spirit and atmosphere of this unique platform is imparted at small, independent TEDx events (‘x’ designates the location of the event), which are licensed by TED and organized independently in communities around the world.

How TEDx Came to Town
In 2015, the Alumni Programs Team of the U.S. Embassy planned to host the first ever TED event in Uzbekistan as part of its annual plan. However, big ideas always come with big challenges. A committed team of like-minded people is imperative to bring those ideas to life. The same thing happened with our TEDx project.

Right from the moment the TEDx idea struck us, we knew it was not going to be a smooth journey. Uniting the triple power of good will, motivation and pride for the bright minds of Uzbekistan, we joined hands with passionate alumni members and other youth to make the first ever TEDx event in Uzbekistan happen.

This project idea coincided with the return of the Global UGRAD 2014-2015 cohort when the recent alumni were experiencing reverse culture shock and were eager to give back to their local community through meaningful projects. Jakhongir Azimov and a team of alumni obtained a TEDx license to independently organize the event in Tashkent under the name TEDxMustaqillikSquare.
The first ever TEDx conference in Uzbekistan was entitled “Bright Vision for the Common Future.”

Incredible stories of bright minds, adventurous travelers, talented musicians, actors, photographers, illusionists, head-hunters, scholars, diplomats and ultimately, TEDsters, touched our hearts. By collecting the humble, yet authentic ideas and stories and revealing them to the wide public, the team was pursuing the very essence of TED conferences – “Ideas worth spreading.”

Nargiza Azimova, SUSI 2017 participant, who was curating speakers, says that TEDxMustaqillikSquare has become an inspiration for new endeavors – “Johann Goethe once said that every single person has the power of art that is able to create imaginary things, the power that wouldn’t let you rest until you express yourself. I consider TED as that power which will let me and the other participants share ideas and aspire for new endeavors.”

It was at times a long and challenging road equally filled with moments of joy. As TED believes in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world, bringing its authenticity to Uzbekistan was the top priority and the biggest challenge. We carried our hope over every speed bump, to every Saturday afternoon meet-up, and through every moment of doubt and uncertainty that came our way. Every lesson helped us to become stronger, inspired, focused and uniTED.

The following speakers delivered brief talks during the TEDx conference:

- Alisher Faizullaev, 2012 Fulbright Scholar, former Uzbek Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and NATO, Director of the Negotiations Laboratory at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy;
- Hilola Suleymanova, 2003 Global UGRAD Program alumna and DreamJob Advisor;
- Cindy Edson, an American citizen who has lived in Uzbekistan for the past 23 years and is a social projects developer and co-founder of the first ever occupational training center for disabled young adults;
- Kadir Muminov, Choreographer, and People’s Artist of Uzbekistan;
- 2012 Summer Work & Travel Program alumnus and TEDx Public Relations Manager, Akbar Tadjimov. We all need a place to relate, therefore, TEDxMustaqillikSquare has become a platform for organizers to express themselves and embrace their own personalities.

“Small discoveries can be a stepping stone to a greater journey. This is what happened with our TED project. It feels great to be part of something big and of a worthy ideal.” - says 2012 Summer Work & Travel Program alumnus and TEDx Public Relations Manager, Akbar Tadjimov. We all need a place to relate, therefore, TEDxMustaqillikSquare has become a platform for organizers to express themselves and embrace their own personalities.

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- Kadir Muminov, Choreographer, and People’s Artist of Uzbekistan;
Sevara Mirsidikova: “Music helps me fill my world in bright colors and adds a deeper meaning to my life.”

Kadir Muminov: “A nation’s culture resides in the traditions, languages, cuisine and dances of its people. We need to preserve the Uzbek national dance traditions, the foundation of which were laid out by Tamara Khanum, Isakhar Akilov, Mukarram Turgunbaeva and Evgeniy Baranovsky.”

Ernest Kurtveliev, adventure photographer;
Dmitry Polyakov, illusionist; and
Sevara Mirsidikova, a visually impaired student at the Victor Uzpensky Republican Special Music Academic Lyceum.

Each speaker created a special atmosphere filled with a diversity of emotions and stories that touched many hearts.

Dmitriy Polyakov: “Controlling your attention is not as easy as it sounds. The closer you look the less you may see.”

Hilola Suleymanova: “You cannot pursue complete happiness without loving your job.”
“Organizing TEDxMustaqillikSquare gives me the meaning to be connected with like-minded people willing to define their path and see the world from different angles.”
Jakhongir Azimov, TEDxMustaqillikSq License Holder/2015 Global UGRAD Program alumnus

“For me, TED is an opportunity to travel in the mindsets of speakers. Interestingly, while listening to the ideas and projects of speakers, I smoothly move into the world where these ideas are realized and put into effect.”
Umidjon Yorkulov, Benjamin Franklin Summer Institute Program alumnus

“I’m always open to new ideas, fresh views, and inspiring projects. TED combines all of that. I’m beyond excited about the first ever TEDx event and I’m more than proud to be a part of it. TED is about each and every one of us.”
Alex Tagaev, 2015 Global UGRAD Program alumnus and the person behind the TEDxMustaqillikSq communications strategy.

“Whatever we do in life should mean something. That’s why we believe in TED. At first, our dream seemed impossible. There were so many bumps and challenges in the road. However, now we made it a reality. Dreams are only visions in our mind. It takes hard work, commitment and passion to make them come true. With our outstanding TEDx team on board, we now believe anything is possible.”
Utkir Tadjimov and Tohir Halniyazov, U.S. Embassy Alumni Programs Team

Special thanks to non-alumni members for their commitment and support of the first TEDx project from initiation to completion.

Need a dose of inspiration? Watch TEDxMustaqillikSq video talks here: www.tedxmustaqilliksquare.com/video/

Become a TEDster by joining project communities on Facebook and Instagram.

Photos by Ruslan Rakhmatov
On January 7th, eighty alumni of various U.S. government-funded exchange programs from all regions of Uzbekistan came together to meet representatives from the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education, the Ministry of Public Education, and the Uzbekistan-U.S. Exchange Alumni.

During the conference, the alumni discussed the ongoing reforms in education, science, technology, the environment and other spheres in addition to their opportunities for contribution. The Conference also marked the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and the United States.

Opening the Alumni Conference, Chargé d’Affaires Lesslie Viguerie stressed the importance of connecting U.S. Exchange Alumni with relevant Ministries. This would help alumni use the knowledge and experience they gained in the United States to make a positive impact in their communities and to the people of Uzbekistan.

Deputy Minister of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education Majid Karimov addressed the audience and thanked the U.S. Embassy for its efforts to connect Exchange alumni and their Ministries to support reforms in a number of domains.
He also encouraged alumni support in the following areas: ensuring quality education; adjusting the existing and adopting a new curriculum in academic institutions of higher and secondary special education to meet the needs of Uzbekistan's economic sector; and training and retraining of faculty and staff in academic institutions of higher education in Uzbekistan.

One of the main sessions of the Conference discussed how alumni can promote English language teaching and learning in Uzbekistan. Mr. Nasirov of the Ministry of Public Education briefed alumni on the implementation of the Presidential Decree 1875 "On measures to further improve the foreign language learning system."

Cultural Affairs Officer Diane Del Rosario presented the Embassy's English Access Microscholarship Program (Access). The program started in 2004 and offers intensive English language classes taught by alumni to 13-25 year old students.

Later courses also included IT classes. At the moment more than 1,000 students have completed the program. 80% of program graduates get basic computer literacy skills like emailing while 20% say the program helped them enroll in university. A 2013 Fulbright Scholar program alumna who is also the Access Program Coordinator in the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan Feruza Masharipova, shared success stories of Access program alumni in Khorezm. She joined the program in 2009 and has helped 162 students succeed since then. According to Masharipova, 60% of her students are now enrolled in universities and 40% are employed in the Khorezm hotel industry and local businesses.

During the session, Filura Tosheva, a 2012 Fulbright Foreign Student Program alumna, presented the "Learn English with U.S. Exchange Alumni" project which was launched by the PAS Alumni Unit in January 2016. The project offers students of different ages and language proficiencies learn English from alumni for free. After a successful start the project is now hosting its third class.

The second session of the Conference was about the Fulbright Association of Uzbekistan. To date, the Fulbright Association remains the only registered alumni association in the country. Fulbright Scholar Program Alumni and Board Members of the Association briefed the participants on the activities of the Fulbright Association branches in Tashkent, Bukhara and Tashkent regions. They further encouraged alumni to join the Association.

The third session focused on TechWomen, 2016 Global Entrepreneurship Summit, Global Village, FLEX and Global UGRAD alumni projects aimed at supporting ongoing reforms in educational, scientific and technological spheres in Uzbekistan. The Alumni Programs Team also presented upcoming projects and initiatives including the TEDxMustaqillikSquare conference, Alumni on the Move, and Alumni Mentors.

In the second part of the conference participants were invited to discuss current reforms and issues in education, business, and STEM areas in focus groups facilitated by Public Affairs Section staff and a representative of the Uzbekistan-U.S. Committee for Coordination of Science and Technology Development. These discussions culminated with participants presenting their proposals on the ways they could support the ongoing reforms of Uzbekistan in the relevant areas.

During the conference, participants told the Alumni Programs Team about how they are contributing, or plan to contribute, to the relations between Uzbekistan and the United States. Here are some highlights from the participants: “The conference demonstrated the potential that our generation possesses. I was very impressed by the upcoming TEDx conference, and
The conference concluded with a special treat from organizers – a grand dinner during which guests enjoyed the alumni performances, namely from the band Jazzirama and the Zlotnikov dance school.

The conference, an all-day series of guest lectures, interactive talks, workshops, and presentations in English, provided alumni who have participated in U.S. – Uzbekistan educational exchange programs over the past 25 years a chance to learn about ways they can contribute to ongoing reforms in educational, environmental, English language teaching, STEM, and business fields in Uzbekistan. More importantly, it showcased Embassy programs and U.S. exchange alumni talents and capabilities to the pertinent government ministries, eliciting positive comments from the GOU and potentially opening the door to deeper U.S. – Uzbekistan collaboration.

Photo courtesy: U.S. Embassy Tashkent
On June 23, the Alumni Unit screened ‘Hidden Figures’, a 2016 American comedy-drama film directed by Theodore Melfi and written by Melfi and Allison Schroeder.

Three brilliant African-American women at NASA -- Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) -- serve as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in history: the launch of astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell) into orbit, a stunning achievement that restored the nation’s confidence, turned around the Space Race, and galvanized the world.

The movie session kicked off with welcome remarks by Ambassador Pamela Spratlen, who spoke briefly about the movie and the role female African-American mathematicians played in a major NASA program.

“Hidden Figures is a story of brilliance, struggle and willpower, and it is important in that it depicts a trio of female visionaries, who crossed all gender and race lines to encourage generations to dream big,” Ambassador Spratlen said. ‘Hidden Figures’ received three nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Picture and Best Supporting Actress for Spencer at the 89th Academy Awards. The film earned four awards at the African-American Film Critics Association, among other accolades.
On May 1, the Third Round of the “Learn English with U.S. Exchange Alumni” Project started at the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent.

The project offers two separate courses, ‘Language in Use’ and ‘TOEFL iBT’, with classes held three times a week, each lasting an hour and a half. 28 and 26 people enrolled in the two courses respectively.

‘Language in Use’ is open to anyone interested in improving their English while the other course, ‘TOEFL iBT Preparation Course,’ is designed for learners of English with a proficiency above the intermediate level. The TOEFL course also seeks to help students planning to apply to U.S. colleges and universities. Conducted by U.S. Exchange Alumna and professional EFL instructor Flora Tosheva, the courses also help students to learn about American culture, holidays, and traditions.

Upon conclusion of the courses the participants are awarded Completion Certificates. Also, the top ten students of the TOEFL course are given TOEFL vouchers that entitle them to take the official test free of charge.

Flora has a special attitude to her work and her students. She inspires them and leads by example - “Relying on my experience I can say when I was learning English technically I learned it myself. I took my first TOEFL at the age of 14 I had to work on my own a lot.”

As a professional English teacher Flora provided some advice for any language learners:

• Immerse yourself and get a lot of input. No input – no output.
• Attitude to the culture and language is very closely tied. You need to like the culture for the language that you’re learning. Immerse yourself in the culture for the language that you are learning, otherwise it’s just not going to happen for you.

• Fluency and proficiency comes with time. Anybody who is chasing the time limit is doing it wrong, they should be looking into quality which is very different from fluency.

• Any person who is learning a language needs to understand that you can’t learn a language in 3-4 days. You can learn basic communication in 3 months. But when we talk about fluency, it means that you are totally free to be able to express everything. English native speakers listen to at least 10 hours of speech a day until the age of 18. Multiply the numbers and you will get a lot of hours. If you want to do that in 3-4 months, that’s not happening.
In 2017, the U.S. Department of State hosted its seventh annual Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) project competition. AEIF supports alumni initiatives that promote shared values and innovative solutions to global challenges.

This year, out of 1,014 project submissions from 125 countries, 68 alumni teams representing 53 countries have been selected as finalists. These alumni will support business development and economic opportunity, encourage civic participation and resilient communities, foster education and inclusion, and empower women and girls around the world.

Full summaries of these impactful projects are here: https://goo.gl/pm1DPz

FULBRIGHT VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM

The U.S. Embassy announces the annual Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program! This U.S. Government sponsored exchange program is for accomplished scholars from Uzbekistan wishing to conduct research in the U.S. for a period up to one academic year. The application deadline for 2018 Fulbright Visiting Scholar is October 28, 2017. https://uz.usembassy.gov/education-culture/exchange-programs/fulbright-visiting-scholar-program/