

## **Where Are They Now?**

### **A Look at Exceptional Model Arab League Alumni**

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**David Valente**  
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#### **How did you begin your participation in Model Arab League?**

I came to Kennesaw State University as a non-traditional student. I was newly married, just about to turn 30 and was looking for a change in my professional life. I decided to pursue my degree in a field I was passionate about, so I enrolled with a major in International Affairs. I thought I was going to specialize in Eastern European/Russian affairs but in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, I decided to take a Politics of the Middle East course, the instructor, Dr Nurudeen Akinyemi was the advisor of KSU's Model Arab League team at the time. He made a pitch for the organization during our first class and I expressed interest. I was soon meeting with the group, a motley crew of people I immediately felt comfortable to be around. I did not know what committee I wanted to do, since I was the newest member, I took what was available and that was the Economic Affairs Committee. That first year I competed at SERMAL and then at NUMAL and won Honorable Mention delegate. I was also selected as Chair of the Economic Affairs committee for the 2004 model year. I helped take the committee from a limited participation committee to a full committee of the MAL. I was also the first non-Northeastern/Converse chair to be named in quite a few years.

#### **Could you start by giving an overview of the path you took after college and how you got to where you are today?**

I was working full time for Hewlett Packard the entire time I was in school and at the start of my Master's Degree program. Just months after leaving Kennesaw, my job was outsourced to

Costa Rica, unfortunately I was not allowed to go to Costa Rica too. I did a little temp work for the next few months and then started work at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Decatur, GA in July 2007. In 2013, I took a position as a Business Analyst at VA Benefits Central Office in Washington DC and became a Senior Business Analyst in 2014. I lived in Arlington, VA until 2017 and then moved to Martinsburg, WV where I live now. I help marry up our regulations and procedures to the technical requirements of our internal claims processing applications, if that does not make your eyes glaze over, I am not sure what will.

I am also a political activist I am currently State Chair of a political party in West Virginia since 2019. My leanings (which I can't discuss due to laws) and career mean I am somewhat a real-life Ron Swanson, only more humorous and less cantankerous and lacking former wives named Tammy. I have also worked on campaigns from President down to school board and served in party leadership at all levels. My experience as MAL chair has helped me in the day to day administrative aspects of the job and running meetings efficiently. My experience as a delegate has helped me in public speaking and lobbying efforts in Charleston and in local WV communities.

### **What are some habits that led to your successful education and career?**

Never be afraid to try something new or do something difficult. When you are new, employers are not expecting perfection. They are looking for people to be adaptable, and willing to step up and try new things and be innovative. When someone underestimates you, take it as a challenge and wow them. Sometimes those who do underestimate you, end up being your biggest advocates in your career. Treat those above you and below you in your life & career well. You never know when situations will change.

### **Graduating college can be disorientating for many students, how did you find direction after leaving college life?**

I was lucky in that I was already in the "real world" throughout my college career. Still I did have career challenges just after graduating. I did continue my education in a Masters of Diplomacy with International Commerce focus at Norwich University. I think my best advice on the transition is to understand what your priorities are and align your interests and lifestyle towards those goals.

### **With your varied volunteer and work experience, what drew you to work for the Department of Veterans Affairs?**

After my time at Hewlett Packard, I was working temp jobs, and at the time I was working for payroll and benefits processors ADP. KSU had a career day so I had taken an afternoon off to attend. I was passing my resumes out and initially passed the VA table because I was not interested in a healthcare career. I was talking to the table next to me when I heard the VA recruiter mention they did benefits work so I approached her and told her about my experience. She took my resume and said they would be in touch, 2 months later I got an email to fill out an employment questionnaire and the next morning I was contacted for an interview. I really is not in my degree plan, but you can apply skill sets attained in your educational life to any job. I use my diplomacy skills all the time in my job, I will rule people dilatory from time to time because I like using the word dilatory.

**You attended numerous Model Arab League Conferences since 2003 and won awards on the regional and national level. How many models did you attend and what are some of the memories you have from those conferences? What was your favorite model to attend?**

2003: SERMAL: ECON No Award NUMAL: ECON: Honorable Mention

2004: SERMAL ECON Chair No Award NUMAL: ECON Chair No Award

2005: NERMAL: Political Affairs: Outstanding SERMAL: Heads of State: Outstanding NUMAL: Heads of State: Outstanding

2006: SERMAL: Political Chair: No Award NUMAL: Political Chair: Outstanding

I loved each of the models, whether they went smoothly or were unmitigated dumpster fires, precisely because of the people I would get to hang out with. My favorite would have to be the NERMAL in 2005, it was our first time heading to Boston, our academic advisor at the time, Linda Morrisson, was sick and recovering so I was the team captain/advisor/delegate all in one, the whole weekend was a whirlwind from the time we landed until we left. I got to experience all aspects of conference life.

Another memory that I think most of the people in MAL will remember me for is my use of empty bottle awards. During conference, I drink a lot, no not alcohol, I would go through several bottles of water or soda a day per conference. I would save them until the final moments before Committee adjourned for summit. I would hand out the empty bottles as an award for something funny they said or did in the midst of the conference. What prompted it was in the first hour of my first-time chairing, the delegate represented Palestine called themselves Israel by accident. So, every time someone would say something funny, let a curse word slip in debate, I would note it and hand out a trophy at the end. I would also let delegates nominate others for awards for things I might have missed. It was a good way to get people in a good frame of mind before leaving the committee room and have a better conference experience. My favorite bottle award was calling down Holly Jordan at my final conference and giving her my "Partner in Crime" award.

I was also Political Chair for several Atlanta High School Models from 2006 – 2013. I was SecGen for one conference as well. It was awesome passing on the MAL tradition to teenagers that would end up doing MAL in college.

**How did your experience with Model Arab League help you academically and professionally?**

I was able to marry up some of my academic work with the research I was doing for conferences, whether it was as a delegate or as a chair. I added the Middle East and Iran as an area of concentration in my studies. My skills as a delegate have help me in building coalitions in both work and politics. My skills as a chair have helped me demonstrate leadership in a group setting and help organizations run more efficiently.

Recently I was invited on the radio after the killing of the Iranian general Soleimani to discuss US/Iranian relations in recent history. My research abilities and being able to view history from a neutral lens and argue both sides of the issue helped me provide an analysis that helped the hosts and audience understand a more balanced understanding of the conflict rather than the "they hate us for our freedom" knee jerk reaction that was prevalent following the attack.

**What was an influential topic or issue that you studied and debated while you were in Model Arab League?**

Well it seemed every time we went to NUMAL a major real story would happen, in 2003, the Iraq invasion began, Pope John Paul II died during another. Bird flu was an emergency topic during my last year in 2006. We talked about Arab League wide free trade markets, we talked about development, we made the GCC pay for it, it's what we do.

**Are there any friends or connections you made while in Model Arab League who you still have contact with today?**

Oh gosh yes, previous interviewee Holly Jordan from Converse is my future ex-wife. She is one of my favoritest people ever in the universe. Phil D'Agati, the MALfather, Mark Mesiti, the MALsiglieri from Northeastern, most of my former teammates at Kennesaw like Imana Rucker, Adria Spadavecchia, Ghizlane Kirane, Brian Parker, Emil Man and Mehrnush Sadaat among many others. Thankfully an invention towards the end of my academic career, the Book of Face, has helped in keeping up with friends near and far.