

Where Are They Now?

A Look at Exceptional Model Arab League Alumni



Holly Jordan

New Business Development Manager - Anera

How did you come to participate in Model Arab League?

Honestly, it wasn't intentional. Many women come to Converse College wanting to participate in MAL, which is an incredibly competitive process to join at Converse. An email went out my freshman year (2003) about some sort of debate club (I now know it was in fact *not* a debate club) about the Middle East (I had never heard of the Arab League at the time). It sounded fun, and I had done Debate League in high school, so I figured why not? I did the research - the topic was the West Bank Wall, and we were assigned either Israel or Palestine - and came prepared. I biffed the tryout at the very end and was not chosen for the team. I then took an International Relations class with Converse's MAL advisor, Joe Dunn, as an elective. I guess I did well enough in class debating the topics of the course, as Dr. Dunn asked me to join the team roughly three weeks before SERMAL 2004. Converse represented both Jordan and Libya that year, so Dr. Dunn of course assigned me to Jordan. Yes, I was Holly Jordan the Delegate representing Jordan. And yes, I still have that placard.

Because I had joined so late, there was not a spot for me to attend Nationals that year. One of my teammates, Josie Shaheen (née Fingerhut), serving as Assistant Secretary-General that year, convinced Dr. Dunn to let me serve as Chief of Staff that year, a position she made up that we now use at every major conference. When I got there, the entire delegation of Eritrea had no-showed. There were topics on Eritrea in both Political Affairs (then Ministers of the Interior) and Economic Affairs that year, as well a case in the Arab Court of Justice, and I ended up representing Eritrea in all three committees. I had been in MAL all of about six weeks at this point. Josie introduced me to Philip D'Agati, the previous year's

Secretary-General with whom 12 years later I would co-author *The Model Arab League Manual*. My knowledge of the region was still so new that when Josie told me I was representing Eritrea, I asked Phil *what* an Eritrea was. Needless to say, he laughed at me, corrected my interrogative to *where*, and gave me a binder of research and a briefing on the three topics I would be debating and presenting. That first semester in the program ended with my study-travel visit to Jordan, bringing to an end a whirlwind six months that I never expected to experience. Those first experiences caused me to change my major and set me on a path of 15 years' service to the program.

Could you start with a quick rundown of the path you took after college and how you got to where you are today?

After leaving Converse College in 2006, I began a Master of Arts in Religion at the University of Georgia, which I completed in August of 2009. That degree was far different than what I had studied at Converse, namely political theory and MENA politics. My Master's focused on Biblical and Hellenistic Judaism. I had always been interested in the unique position of modern Israel in the Middle East, and I suppose I entered that degree with a "how did we get here?" mentality. During this time, both during my degree and in the gap before my PhD, I served as an adjunct professor of religion at UGA, teaching world religions. After a brief stint as a Communications Director at a large, Presbyterian Church, I matriculated into Virginia Tech's interdisciplinary Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Social Thought (ASPECT) PhD program in 2011, earning my degree in 2016. In this degree, I combined my undergraduate studies in politics with my comparative religion background from UGA to study the Arab-Israeli Conflict, focusing on the political and security issues revolving around the evolution of personal status laws under the State of Israel. I was able during this time to teach in the Departments of Religion and Culture, Political Science, and History and gained an appreciation for my areas of interest from a multidisciplinary perspective. I also began a Model Arab League program at Tech in 2012, for which I was awarded the Model Arab League Lifetime Achievement Award. I, along with my students at Virginia Tech, founded the Appalachian Regional Model Arab League (ARMAL), which has continued to be a successful hybrid Model since 2014. At the time, I was the first alum of the program to start a new delegation, and I am now one of five program alumni (myself, Philip D'Agati, Joseph W. Roberts, David Takitaki, and Rob Willingham) to advise college teams.

These experiences led to a three-year appointment as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at Roanoke College beginning in 2014, where I was able to teach in a wonderful, liberal arts environment very similar to my Converse days. In addition to the core, comparative religions courses, I was able to design my own course on the politics and religion of the modern MENA region. I also started a Model Arab League program at Roanoke College in 2016, and Roanoke has continued to be a high-performing college at ARMAL, the Southeast Regional Model Arab League (SERMAL), and the National University Model Arab League (NUMAL). In 2017, my Visiting position ended, and I moved to Washington, DC, with the goal of working in something relating to the Levant Region, where I could use my studies to do development work. At a brief stint writing proposals for a federal contractor focusing in cybersecurity, I found my current career, writing grant

applications and managing the New Business Development department within Anera (American Near East Refugee Aid), an international governmental organization serving refugees in the Levant since 1968. Everything in my studies and career has led me to this dream job, where I get to use my research background, subject matter expertise, and love of the Middle East to help secure lasting improvements to the lives of refugees in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan.

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

Create family wherever you go. I was a navy brat growing up, and my life reset every two to three years until I graduated high school. The same was true in college - 3 years at Converse, 5 years at UGA, 6 years at Virginia Tech and Roanoke College, and now 2 years in DC. All that transience has made me realize that it is the bonds you form with your peers and your community that give you a sense of grounding through life. Find a group of people that bring out the best of you, that you can rely on in times of need, and with whom you can grow in your career and studies. My closest friends are the ones I made through college and graduate school, with whom I would workshop papers, debate my studies, and celebrate with when I achieved even the smallest of victories. Surround yourself with supportive people, and be a good friend to them, and everything else falls into place.

Also, remember that you won't be able to give 100% every day. Sometimes giving it your all means only being able to do 10% of what you know you're able to do--and that is okay! Do your best, but be forgiving of yourself. And apply the lessons you learn to being better the next day.

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

I went to more college! I knew I wanted to be a professor, but I wasn't exactly sure where I wanted to land. My varied degrees show this, because I pretty much just studied what I thought was interesting. Without having a rigid plan in place, I believe I was more open to considering other learning paths and career goals. I had no intention of returning back to my interest in the Arab-Israeli Conflict when I entered my master's. But one elective with the late Dr. Randy Sturman on the anthropology of the Conflict reignited my interest in that area. The term paper for that course eventually became one of the core chapters of my dissertation seven years later. I don't know that this is the best way to go about life post-college. In fact, I'm sure most parents would be horrified to read this. But, as I always advised my students, spend your time in college figuring out what you're passionate about. I changed my major three times during college and ended up far away from where I started (biochemistry!). If you end up choosing to go to graduate school, do it because it is *the* thing that will make you happy in that moment. If anything else will make you happy, pursue it. School will always be there for you to return to if you choose. But find something that makes you excited to wake up in the morning and pursue that. For some, it will be a career. For others, it will be your life outside of your career. But use your talents for good.

With such varied experiences, why did you decide to work for Anera?

I became aware of Anera through the National Council! On a study-travel visit to Lebanon in 2012, I met Bill Corcoran, then the President and CEO of Anera. He described Anera's work in Lebanon and Palestine, and I was immediately struck by how unique Anera was as a development INGO. All but one of Anera's country staff, who make up the majority of our staff, are from the communities in which they serve. It is truly a bottom-up focused organization that responds to the needs on the ground instead of imposing "solutions" from America without local context. As my career shifted out of academia, I found myself visiting Anera's website to see what they had been doing since I met Bill, and I found a job listing that felt like reading my own CV back to me. I immediately applied for the position and was fortunate enough to be hired by Anera in January 2019. Anera allows me to put my study of political and cultural theory into practice, using everything I've studied since I was 17 to work in a region I've been fascinated by since I was a child. I get to work with amazing people from all of the countries in which we work, and I find myself fulfilled in ways that I never thought I would outside academia.

You attended numerous Model Arab League Conferences since 2004 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?

I actually had to pull up my CV and tally this. I *believe* I have attended 27 models, including NERMAL, SERMAL, NUMAL, CARMAL, NHSMAL, ARMAL, and AHSMAL. I have served as delegate, justice, advocate, assistant chief justice, chief justice, chief of staff, chair, faculty advisor (for three difference colleges including once as a surrogate advisor for Converse College), judge, conference coordinator, and plenary keynote speaker over the last 15 years (and intend to judge at NUMAL again in 2020). In fact, the only positions in MAL I have not held are bailiff, secretary-general, or assistant secretary-general! I won surprisingly few awards during this time as a student - the only award I won during undergraduate was Best Crisis Chair at the 2006 NUMAL and as far as I know am still the only Chief Justice to have won a chairing award. I earned my only debating award during graduate school in the Heads of State committee in 2012. Most of my MAL career as a student was spent in the Arab Court of Justice, which gives me a more unique pedigree than most students. Some of the most fun parts of that experience included researching the docket for court cases each year and researching legal precedent to write into topic guides. Some of the Word templates I designed for the ACJ as National Chief Justice in 2005-2006 are still used to this day!

SERMAL will always be my favorite conference to attend. It is held at my alma mater (Converse) and is always a mini-reunion of Converse MAL alumnae. Getting to go back to Spartanburg nearly every year since I graduated to do something I love as much as I loved my time there has been a blessing. Each model has its own personality, and NUMAL and NERMAL were some of the most fun experiences I've ever had. I could write an entire book on stories from during committee and after-hours shenanigans, so to list some memories here would take up too many pages. But I can say that because of the close bonds with students and peers from schools such as Georgia State, Kennesaw State, Northeastern, Hollins, Berry, and, of course, Converse College, my entire MAL experience has shaped who I am today.

Along with the conferences, I was fortunate enough through the Council to participate in two study-travel visits. The first was to Jordan in 2004 to study Arabic and Levantine politics at Ahl al-Bayt University in Mafrq. I had never before been out of the country, my entire world changed. I landed in Jordan not even knowing the Arabic alphabet and was absolutely a fish out of water. One of my dearest MAL friends and 2004 Secretary-General, Daniel Quintal, was on that trip with me, and we still talk about the adventures we had traveling through Jordan for six weeks. I also was chosen for the Lebanon Summer Fellowship in 2012 and traveled through Lebanon for 10 days, meeting with political, social, religious, and youth leaders and learning about Lebanese-American relations. Neither of these opportunities would have been possible without being an alumna of MAL.

You wrote the book on Model Arab League. What made you decide to do this? Do you have any tips for students who want to be better delegates?

So the book... the book just fell out of the sky. Matthew Kopel, from Bloomsbury, contacted Philip D'Agati, my colleague, close friend, program alum, and faculty advisor of MAL with a CV in the program even longer than mine, about the possibility of writing a textbook on the subject. Matthew was an alum of the program as well and believed this would be a valuable resource for both current students and schools looking to start a program. Phil reached out to me about co-authoring the textbook, and we made a plan to tackle the project. In a multi-day writing storm at Phil's house over winter break 2014-2015, Phil and I, along with frantic phone calls to several of our students and delegates from our own years (some of whom actually showed up at Phil's house), storyboarded the book, created the outline, and pulled together our (at that time) decade-plus resources on the program. I dragged binders I hadn't opened since college out of bookcases to use as source material, and Phil and I relived so many moments together over those few days. The book came together more quickly than either of us could have imagined, and Manchester University Press (who picked up the contract from Bloomsbury) published it in March 2016. The book is the only textbook for the program to date, and I am so incredibly proud of what Phil and I were able to put together. (Though, as a side note to anyone in graduate school: if you are given the opportunity to write a book that is *not* your dissertation, realize that 1) you *will* get behind on your dissertation and 2) your advisors will not be happy about this...)

As to advice? TALK. Just talk. The first time you speak at a conference can be absolutely terrifying. Just rip off the band-aid. Get on the speaker's list. Raise your placard during

moderated debate (longways, not upright so your chair can read it, and not before they're done asking for speakers). If you've done the research and know your country's position, you'll get into the flow. If you're new to parliamentary procedure, you'll pick it up through the help of your peers and chair. Just immerse yourself in it. And know you'll make mistakes and will probably be corrected. Mistakes help us learn. For whatever reason--course credit, passion for the region, your friends guilted you into it--you're there. Make the most of those 2-3 days. Oh, and also, buy our book.

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

I joke with the other MAL alumni in my life, of which there are still many, that my new job lets me do Model Arab League, but "for real." Through assisting with program design, coming up with fun acronyms for projects, and working with ministries and local municipalities, I am actively doing the work that MAL prepared us for. Furthermore, I believe I owe much of my academic success to the research and presentation skills I learned in the program. There is nothing like a crisis situation at a Model to teach you how to research quickly, react logically, and come up with solutions to an unexpected problem. Term papers, especially when you put them off like many students, become equally stressful crisis situations. And as much as no former professor wants to hear this, I was able to churn out high quality research and writing in just a few days because of those skills.

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

I entered MAL, at 18 years old, during the first year of the Second Iraq War and the year both the Gaza Disengagement Plan and the expansion of the West Bank Wall was announced. These topics showed up over and over again through 2011. Through the second half of my 20s and all of my 30s, the ongoing Syrian conflict has been at the center of many committee agendas. But ongoing struggles in the region also are discussed over time, and I've been able to see the evolution of country policies on each of them. You can't go a year without a desalination topic, and every few years the status of the Hala'ib Triangle, Western Sahara, or Mayotte crops up in the ACJ. MAL has always been a program grounded in history and responsive to evolution of politics in the region, and both of these factors are what make the program strong.

For instance, Yassir Arafat died the day before NERMAL 2004. We were just in the early days of social media, and so none of us learned of this until we saw the cover of the New York Times while waiting for our flight from Spartanburg, SC to Boston, MA. We were Lebanon that year, so this had clear implications for our policy as well as the policies of many of the attending schools. Under MAL rules, anything in the "real world" that happens before opening ceremonies is true in committee. The intelligence, poise, ability to pivot, and brilliance of my fellow delegates was on full display that weekend, and I remember that conference experience being one of the most dynamic in which I ever participated.

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

HA! Not a day goes by where I do not talk to someone from the MAL community, either personally or professionally, and you can absolutely bet stories from the “old days” come up every time we’re together. Any time something interesting happens in the region, my phone blows up with texts to discuss what’s going on. I have friends in nearly every state on the Eastern seaboard, and across the country and the world, with whom I can crash when I travel. I am still a part of a rich network of Converse MAL alumnae that all were shaped by the program and have gone on to be some of the most successful women I know. I would not be who I am today without the mentorship and support of my Converse advisor, Joe Dunn, with whom I keep regular contact.

I have had the pleasure of having peers and students from the program as teammates at two of my jobs since earning my PhD. Being “conference mom” at the conferences I attend means that I am able to interact with students from schools all over the country, and I am so grateful to be able to share my experiences and advice with them. I cannot imagine a time when I am not affiliated with Model Arab League, and I’m so touched that the Council keeps finding new ways in which to keep me involved!