

Citizen Diplomacy in Charlotte through Sister Cities

by David Lynn, October 2019

How do Charlotteans measure up when it comes to citizen diplomacy? With over 15% of our population born abroad and an ever-expanding global business environment, how has our evolving identity shaped how we, as a city, interact with the world? Six decades ago, as the Cold War was escalating, President Eisenhower made a call for citizen diplomacy, emphasizing the need for “creating understanding between peoples” while building partnerships across different cultures. No longer was diplomacy solely the work of embassies, but instead the responsibility of everyday individuals. In 1962, Charlotte responded to this challenge by establishing our first formal sister city relationship with Arequipa, Peru. In the years that followed, similar sister city partnerships were established with Krefeld, Germany; Baoding, China; Voronezh, Russia; Limoges, France; Wroclaw, Poland; and Kumasi, Ghana.

Citizen diplomats in Charlotte embraced these formal relationships by forging bonds with our sister cities through student and adult exchanges, business connections, community celebrations, art and cultural awareness events, and impactful service initiatives. Past Charlotte mayors and civic leaders have made official visits to our sister cities, while our city honored their arriving counterparts and named parks and roads in tribute. The legacy of these accomplishments can be found on dated displays on the second floor of Charlotte Mecklenburg Government Center where images and artifacts aim to celebrate our connections with the world.

Like these displays, our sister city partnerships have seen brighter days. Charlotte’s Sister City Committee last met nearly a decade ago, and questions linger regarding who oversees our sister city efforts. However, hope remains. Last May, OurBridge for Kids, a non-profit based in Charlotte, hosted an arts and cultural celebration focused on Kumasi, Ghana. Last month, students from Waddell Language Academy, a CMS language-based magnet school, traveled to Limoges, France as part of their annual peer-to-peer language and cultural exchange. In a similar effort, a dozen middle school students from Charlotte Country Day School are currently in Peru, on an exchange visit with the Prescott School in Arequipa, as part of an ongoing partnership. Just like relations with true siblings, the connections we have with our sister cities continue on.

In the coming months, the Charlotte International Cabinet is considering recommendations regarding the next step for Charlotte Sister Cities. What should be the relationship between city government and Sister Cities? Should it be

incorporated under the wings of an existing non-profit organization or reestablished as its own non-profit entity? This important conversation will be the focus of an upcoming special workgroup meeting on Wednesday, November 20, from 9:30 AM to 10:30 AM, following the monthly meeting of the Charlotte International Cabinet, at 8:00 AM, in Room 267, of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Government Center, 600 E 4th St, Charlotte. Both meetings are open to the public. We hope all community members who value “citizen diplomacy” will join in this discussion as we consider future possibilities.

Photos from the meeting the took place on Wednesday, November 20, 2019:

