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American Spaces

BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

January 2024 - Happy New Year!

With just over 600 locations, ECA's Office of American Spaces engages people worldwide through content, resources, and programming. American Spaces support U.S. foreign policy goals and strategically promote public diplomacy.

Happy New Year from American Spaces! This issue contains new ideas for new content and new programs. We hope you enjoy this issue!

As always, thank you for sending in your comments and suggestions to americanspaces@state.gov.

Meet Field Support Officer Ashley Gempp: Making Big Connections with America's Smallest State



Ashley Gempp joined the Office of American Spaces as the Field Support Officer covering Europe and Eurasia in Fall 2023. She previously served in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' Office of Academic Exchanges for nine years, managing a variety of portfolios for the Fulbright Program in the Middle East and North Africa region. We invited Ashley to tell her story in her own words:

My husband shook his head, "No matter where you go in the world, you always find a Rhode Island connection. For such a small state, how do you find these people?" Somehow, during our COVID-delayed two-week trip to Europe, I managed to meet a couple from Rhode Island at a remote monastery in Austria, a history professor from Prague who taught at Brown University for a semester, and an aspiring Fulbrighter from Budapest who visited Rhode Island while on a high school exchange program. Across my personal and professional adventures, from a metro platform in the busiest station in Paris to a meeting with a Minister in Jordan, the connections to Rhode Island seem constant. As I settle into my latest adventure with American Spaces and look towards motherhood, I often reflect on my rather unconventional journey from a tiny and

quirky home state.

I grew up in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, a small town on Aquidneck Island, one of four large islands located in Narragansett Bay. With nearly 400 miles of shoreline, Rhode Island is known as the Ocean State, and no resident is more than a half hour from the Atlantic. Summers were spent on the water boating, fishing, swimming, and collecting shells; evening bonfires on the beach; and enjoying all the fresh seafood and quirky Rhode Island delicacies like [Del's Lemonade](#), [Awful Awfuls](#), lobster rolls, [Rhode Island Calamari](#), and [Stuffies](#).

Despite being the smallest state, Rhode Island is packed with culture and a lot of history. Aquidneck Island is home to several U.S. firsts, including the first polo match (1876), circus (1774), and National Lawn Tennis Championship (1881), which was the precursor to the U.S. Open. One of my favorite events is the [Newport Folk Festival](#), an annual music festival since 1959 with a tradition of activism in support of civil rights, women's rights, the LGBTQ+ community, peace, and climate change awareness. The culture of activism goes back to the state's origins. Rhode Island's founders were banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony because of their views on freedom of speech and religion, and they established it as the first colony in North America with a secular government. While the first colony to declare independence, it was the last to ratify the U.S. Constitution, objecting to the lack of protections that were later codified in the First Amendment.

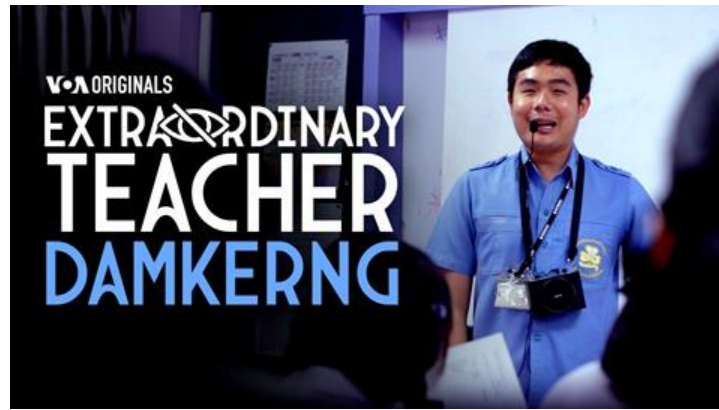
Rhode Island also has a long military history, including for my family. Both of my parents worked at the U.S. Naval base in Newport, my father was an Army veteran, and my grandfather was an officer who served as the founding director of the International Officer Candidate School, later part of the U.S. Naval War College (NWC). I was lucky to make friends with the children of foreign naval officers, which piqued my interest in international affairs. My first job was at the NWC developing case studies on operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn

of Africa and conducting war gaming. It was also my first foray into exchange programs, where building people-to-people ties had quite literally kept the United States from going to war.

Fast-forward several years, and I'd transitioned from Rhode Island to Washington, DC, working as an intern on the International Visitor Leadership Program. I walked into the conference room on the first day of a journalism program, and I recognized the interpreter. They had accompanied the Deputy Director-General of UNESCO during a visit to the Gilded Age [Newport mansions](#) while I was working there as a docent. Such connections would continue into my work with the Fulbright Program. During one of my trips to Jordan, I met with officials from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and one of the officials noted that we had something in common. A big smile spread across his face: he had completed his pharmacy degree at the University of Rhode Island years prior and was pleased to meet someone from the state. Of all the Rhode Island connections during my travels, that one was the most surprising.

And now, after nearly 12 years working in exchanges, I am so excited to work with the Office of American Spaces! American Spaces serves as the first touchpoint to the United States for so many of our visitors and an inspiration for exchange participants who help us maintain those ever-important people-to-people ties. Soon, my husband and I will welcome our first child, and I hope to introduce her to the world of American Spaces, and perhaps as I journey further into these new adventures, I will find more Rhode Island connections.

Breaking Barriers: The Extraordinary Journey of Damkerng, Thailand's Inspiring English Teacher



In the heart of bustling Bangkok, where the vibrant energy of a public high school fills the air, there's a remarkable English teacher who is not only breaking stereotypes but shattering barriers. Meet Damkerng Mungthanya, a visionary educator who, despite being blind since birth, is on a mission to redefine what's possible for individuals with visual impairments.

Damkerng's story is one of resilience, passion, and a commitment to the transformative power of education. As the only teacher with a disability in his school, he faces the unique challenge of navigating a world that often doubts the abilities of those who can't see. In a country where 5.1 million people live with disabilities, and only a fraction are officially recognized, Damkerng is a beacon of hope and a living testament to the untapped potential within the differently-abled community.

In "Extraordinary Teacher Damkerng," a documentary streaming on VOA+, viewers are invited into Damkerng's world, where he defies societal expectations with every lesson. The documentary, which made its debut on December 21, 2023, captures the essence of Damkerng's extraordinary journey.

Despite the staggering statistics that only 6% of registered individuals with disabilities, aged 15-59, are employed in Thailand, Damkerng's story stands as a testament to what can be achieved with determination and adaptive tools. Embracing inclusive education, Damkerng, recognized by the King of Thailand as a role model, uses innovative technology to teach English, proving that vision is not confined to sight alone but extends to the boundless realms of imagination and ambition.



As reported by Reuters, Damkerng's impact reaches far beyond the four walls of his classroom. His narrative challenges preconceived notions about disability, emphasizing that being visually impaired doesn't hinder one from becoming an extraordinary teacher. [Watch the trailer](#) for "Extraordinary Teacher Damkerng" and witness the power of inclusive education in action.

The documentary (available on YouTube [here](#)) promises an inspiring journey into the life of a man who turned adversity into advantage, proving that with the right support and adaptive technology, barriers can be broken, and dreams can be realized. Join the movement for inclusive education, celebrate diversity, and be inspired by Damkerng's unwavering commitment to making a difference.

Events and Resources:

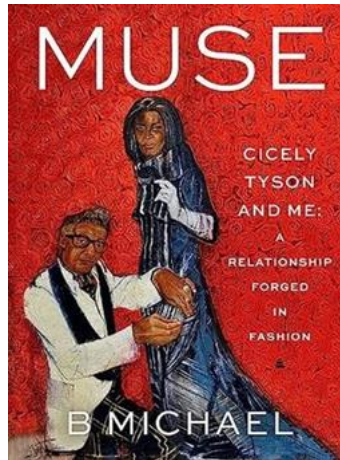
January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month

Since 2010, every U.S. President has dedicated the month of January to human trafficking prevention and awareness by [Presidential Proclamation](#) to raise awareness about and understanding of the different forms of human trafficking and how to identify and address this crime. Every year, U.S. embassies and consulates play an important role in raising awareness of human trafficking around the world.

February is Black History Month

The **Smithsonian Institution** lists many upcoming events for [Black History Month](#) across its organization. The theme for

2024 is *African Americans and the Arts*.



From the **Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture**, a new book talk with B Michael about his fashion partnership with actress and activist Cicely Tyson: [NMAAHC - YouTube](#). Broadcast live on Thursday, February 15, 2024 from 7-9pm EST.

Also from the **Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture**, an on-line exhibit about [Musical Life at Historically Black Colleges and Universities \(HBCUs\)](#).

Super Bowl LVIII

As Super Bowl LVIII approaches, ECA, in partnership with the National Football League (NFL), is offering U.S. Missions and American Spaces the opportunity to share this iconic annual event with international audiences. The game will be held in Las Vegas on February 11, with kickoff at 6:30 pm EST. The NFL will provide streaming codes enabling posts to host watch parties either live or recorded, given time zone challenges. **If you are interested in hosting a Super Bowl watch party for your local audience, please email Brad Scott (ScottBJ@state.gov) and Elise Crane (CraneES@state.gov) by Friday, January 19, noting approximately how many guests you expect.** Please note this public diplomacy opportunity is intended to engage foreign publics, not internal Mission staff, though of course Mission staff are also welcome to attend your watch party. Sports Diplomacy and the Office of American Spaces value your partnership in offering this American sports experience to audiences across the globe.

U.S. Speaker Spot

As a partnership with the [Office of the U.S. Speaker Program](#), the American Spaces Newsletter is featuring selected speakers available for virtual programs with professional audiences on priority themes. For more information about the U.S. Speaker Program, and to submit a program request, please reach out to your local Public Diplomacy Section.

Upcoming speakers include:



Carlos Bustamante is the associate director for project management and planning at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. He has expertise in museum management and preserving African American history and culture, and leads a diverse portfolio of projects, including the Civil Rights Oral History Project in collaboration with the Library of Congress. Bustamante designed the museum's inaugural exhibitions and is an advising consultant for many emerging cultural institutions both domestically and abroad. [Bio](#)



Kalenda Eaton is an associate professor of African and African American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. She is also the director of the Oklahoma Black Homesteader Project, a program funded by the National Park Service that “seeks to recover, reevaluate, and reclaim histories of rural African Americans in Oklahoma.” Eaton can discuss African American social and cultural heritage and Black Diaspora studies. She is the author of publications on the representation of African Americans in history, literature, and popular culture and was a Fulbright Scholar in Nova Scotia. [Bio Video](#)

Planning ahead for March!

Let's Go to the Moon and Back! This upcoming online event, ["To the Moon and Back" \(Exploring Space Lecture\)](#), takes place Wednesday, March 6, 2024, 8 - 9 PM EST - hosted by the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum. The lunar rocks brought home by Apollo astronauts reshaped our understanding of our Moon, the Earth, and the entire solar system. Gathering more of them is one of the most important reasons to go back to the Moon. The Artemis program is enabling lunar sample return both by humans and robots, to places we've never been in some the oldest, coldest places in the solar system. In this lecture, Dr. Barbara Cohen, NASA Goddard, will discuss the most important science from lunar samples and how we are planning for more.

Democracy Toolkit



The Managing American Spaces website now has a [Democracy toolkit](#) available for American Spaces programming. This new toolkit provides information on democratic values and explores elements of U.S. democracy. It also offers helpful resources and lesson plans for practitioners in American Spaces.

We hope you find it useful and welcome any feedback you might have about it and other toolkits.

Calendar of Events

As always, the full calendar is available on the American Spaces [website](#).

January: Human Trafficking Awareness Month – [Human Trafficking Awareness Toolkit](#)

January 2: [Science Fiction Day](#)

January 4: [World Braille Day](#)

January 11: Human Trafficking Awareness Day see [Human Trafficking Awareness Toolkit](#)

January 15: Martin Luther King Jr. Day – [Kanopy documentary](#), Martin Luther King Jr. [Posters](#), and [American History and Culture Toolkit](#)

January 16: National Religious Freedom Day – see [First Amendment Rights: Freedom of Religion Toolkit](#)

January 24: [International Day of Education](#)

January 25: [Opposite Day](#).

January 27: [International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust](#)

January 29: [Puzzle Day](#)

February: African-American History Month - see [Programming toolkit](#)

February 2: [World Wetlands Day](#)

February 4: [International Day of Human Fraternity](#)

February 6: [International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation](#)

February 10: [World Pulses Day](#)

February 11: International Day of Women and Girls in Science

- [I am a Girl](#)
- [American Women in STEM Posters](#)

February 13: [World Radio Day](#)

February 17: [Random Act of Kindness Day](#)

February 19: [Presidents Day – Resource Toolkit](#)

February 20: World Day of Social Justice - See [these resources](#)

- Consider the [Civil Society Certification](#)

February 21: [International Mother Language Day](#)

March

March 3: World Wildlife Day and World Hearing Day

- [World Wildlife Toolkit](#)
- [Environmental Sustainability Toolkit](#)
- [Environmental Diplomacy Simulations](#)
- [World Wildlife Day](#)
- [World Hearing Day](#)
- [Supporting Students with Communication Access Realtime Translation](#)

March 4: [World Engineering Day for Sustainable Development](#)

See [Attract STEM Talent Toolkits](#)

March 8: [International Women's Day](#)

March 10: [International Day of Women Judges](#) - see [Empowering Women Leaders Discussion Guide](#)

March 14: [Pi Day](#) - See [International Day of Mathematics](#)

March 20: [International Day of Happiness](#)

March 21:

- [International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#)
- [International Day of Forests](#)
- [World Down Syndrome Day](#)

March 22:

- [World Water Day](#)
- [Environmental Sustainability Toolkit](#)
- [Environmental Diplomacy Simulations](#)
- [Module on Gender and International Waters](#)

March 23: [World Meteorological Day](#)

March 24: [World Tuberculosis Day](#)

March 25: [International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)

Thanks to all of you who have shared your programming ideas and highlights with your colleagues through our American Spaces FB page. You can continue to share your news and information by emailing us at AmericanSpaces@state.gov. If you have any questions or content to add, please email [Karlene Noel Jennings](mailto:Karlene.Noel.Jennings). To add someone to this newsletter, email us at AmericanSpaces@state.gov.

Engage & Grow (Social Media Playbook)

January

#HumanTraffickingAwarenessMonth

Human Rights: #HumanRightsForAll #EqualityAndJustice
#RightsAdvocacy

January 1 – New Year's Day (New Year) - #NewYearsDay

January 15 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day - #MLKDay

January 19 – National Popcorn Day - #NationalPopcornDay

Please consult with your REPS and/or your local Public Diplomacy Section for advice about current Department of State social media posture or specific situations. Thank you.

Digital assets for use by social media managers for American Spaces are available from the [albums in the American Spaces Facebook group](#). We currently have images for formatted for Facebook and Instagram for upcoming themes and you can customize the assets to fit your local community's needs.

Content Commons 2.0 was just released on November 7, 2023. Content Commons is the central Department repository for messaging guidance and digital content. It now boasts an improved search function, content in reverse chronological order that showcases the most relevant content first, and the future capacity to share content across posts. The redesign is meant to serve all PD Communicators for urgent messaging on press, as well as longer-term content for Ambassadors' speeches, event planning, and targeted audience messaging. You can find it [here](#).

Engage & Grow Digital Crops

Get Ready for Farmcraft 2024 Pre-Season!

Dear Farmcraft Enthusiasts,

Farmcraft 2024 is just around the corner, and we are excited to kick off the journey with the Pre-Season! This phase is your passport to success in Farmcraft, where gaming meets global impact.

Introducing the Pre-Season:

The Pre-Season is a pivotal part of Farmcraft 2024, designed to prepare participants for the main competition. It's not just about gaming; it's about acquiring skills, knowledge, and strategies to make a difference in agriculture and sustainability. Pre-season starts February 8, 2024!

Why the Pre-Season Matters:

The Pre-Season is not your ordinary warm-up. It's where teams form, resources are gathered, and strategies are developed. By participating in the Pre-Season, you're setting the stage for success in Farmcraft 2024.

What to Expect:

- **Team Formation:** Assemble your Farmcraft team, recruit members, and strategize for success.
- **Resource Gathering:** Access valuable resources, guides, and lesson plans to enhance your team's capabilities.
- **Interactive Learning:** Engage in webinars, training sessions, and Minecraft-based activities that prepare you for the competition.

Ready to get started? Visit the [Farmcraft page](#) to learn more about the Pre-Season, its schedule, and how to make the most of this opportunity. On that page, you can also watch the recorded Informational Webinar for an overview of the event. For our Spanish-speaking audience, we'll host a similar information session on January 19, also accessible on the Farmcraft page.

Stay tuned for upcoming newsletters, webinars, and social media updates as we delve deeper into the Pre-Season's offerings. If you have any questions or need assistance, please don't hesitate to reach out to info@nasef.org.

Farmcraft 2024 is not just a game; it's a mission to create a sustainable future. Join us on this incredible journey!





American Spaces

Want to learn about more events in your area or causes you care about? Tell us about yourself and your interests here:

[Update My Preferences](#)

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