

## Former Hostage and 11-Year-Old Genius Spoke at SCI's Annual Conference in Denver Conference

Two widely publicized personalities, with similar interests in international peace and diplomacy, but with vast differences in their ages, were the keynote speakers for the Sister Cities International Annual Conference held in Denver, Colorado, June 28 - July 1, 2000.

The speakers were Dr. Thomas Sutherland, who was held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon for six years, and 11-year-old Gregory R. Smith, who recently completed his first year of college, and who has already established himself as a strong advocate of peace through quality education and the political participation of young people.

When Dr. Sutherland was seized by gunmen from the Islamic Jihad in 1985, Americans received a bird's eye view of his experience through the media. Now SCI Conference participants will hear first-hand about his experiences as a hostage during the Annual Awards Luncheon on Friday, June 30.

Dr. Sutherland, who is a professor and public speaker, has learned from personal experience about the importance of freedom and his U.S. citizenship. Since he was released by his captors in 1991, he has given hundreds of talks to national and international audience in his presentation "Let Freedom Ring...Lessons from Captivity." Over the past nine years, his experiences have been disclosed through film, television, and books.

Appearances on *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *Nightline*, and *Larry King Live* have helped him disseminate his message related to the importance of dealing objectively with terrorism and peace processes, and of understanding and being sensitive to other peoples and cultures.

At the time Dr. Sutherland was taken by hostages in 1985, our other keynote speaker wasn't even born. In fact, Gregory Smith wasn't born until four years later, and he has already made incredibly good use of his life.

Gregory, who will speak at the SCI-sponsored luncheon on Thursday, June 29, is now a sophomore at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. An honor student, he is majoring in mathematics with minors in French and history.

In his spare time, Gregory has founded the United Youth Congress and travels internationally, speaking to organizations about the needs of the world's children. He appeals to world leaders to value children as their country's greatest assets and to guarantee that children and their families will be safe from violence. He has pledged his life to the pursuit of world peace.

When not preparing his homework in Multivariable Calculus and Conversational French, Gregory is a motivational speaker who has shared the stage with Nobel Peace Laureates and political leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mikhail Gorbachev. He has been a guest on *Sixty Minutes*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *CNN*, among others.

These keynote speakers highlighted a program of numerous activities that began Wednesday, June 27. With the theme "A Mile High for Peace," the pre-conference workshops featured site visits and seminars exploring Denver's social service delivery systems. Topics included: grassroots economic development, trade, medical ventures to developing countries, and visits to the city's educational and cultural facilities.

The Conference officially opened on Thursday, June 29, with a full day of regional workshops. These sessions were dedicated to international development and exchanges, and explored organizations, activities, and issues pertinent to each region, as well as successful global and domestic initiatives and how local programs can participate.

Mayor Wellington Webb officially welcomed the delegates on Thursday evening at a reception with entertainment from *Up With People* and the *Cleo Parker Robinson Dancers*. In honor of their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Denver re-signed its sister city agreement with Takayama, Japan.

Friday, June 30, focused on innovative approaches for program development, how to create SCI partnerships, and the future of SCI in the new millennium. The Awards Luncheon recognized the winners of the Annual Awards Program, and Atlanta Sister Cities International concluded the day's activities with a BBQ reception.

After the Annual Business meeting on Saturday, the delegates were free to explore Denver. One suggested activity was visiting the Cherry Creek Arts Festival, which is heralded as one of the best outdoor fine arts and crafts exhibitions in the U.S. The three days of festivities included an artist demonstration stage, educational art activities for children and adults, and live performances.

The final event on Saturday evening was the "Passing the Torch" reception, which marked the change in SCI leadership and closed the 2000 Conference.