

Ambassador's Opening Remarks

America Days Kickoff Event

Nizami Theater Center, Baku Azerbaijan

Tuesday, March 10, 2015, 19:00

Good evening.

Please let me thank all of you for joining us here tonight at our first America Days Festival. Xos gelmisiniz!

One of my primary jobs as Ambassador is to deepen and strengthen the relationship between our countries. One of the best ways I have found to do that is to get out of the office and look for ways to bring the people of our two countries together, to help Americans and Azerbaijanis learn about each other – what makes them tick, what causes them to worry, what makes them happy. And so in addition to strengthening the communications and ties between our two governments, I look to forge closer linkages between the young people, the teachers, scientists, artists, journalists, entrepreneurs, engineers, and others in our two great countries. The events we have planned for America Days are very much about building these relations.

In my first month here, I am finding that we have a lot in common. America and Azerbaijan are both proud, for example, of our cultures of respect and tolerance for diversity.

I know there is a lot more I need to learn as I travel around and meet Azerbaijanis, but I also know there is a lot I can do to enable Azerbaijanis to meet, engage with, and learn about Americans. We certainly do this through official channels, such as the recent visits by Assistant Secretary Nuland, Special Envoy Hochstein and others. But we also bring Azerbaijani and American businesses together, as evidenced by the recent purchase deal signed by SilkWay and Boeing. Everyday our consular section issues visas to businesspeople, students, and tourists looking to visit America – and you can learn more about that during an online “Ask the Consul” session on Friday. We also support academic and professional exchange programs that bring Azerbaijanis to America, and as we are doing during America Days, we bring Americans to Azerbaijan to share our culture face-to-face, person-to-person.

The America Days Festival we are opening tonight is an effort to do more, to offer a greater chance for Azerbaijanis to get to know America better. The Festival includes a chef, Native American dancers, an imam, music groups, and movies. These events will tell you more about America’s story, including both our successes and our failures. And to be honest, the story of America is as much about our failures as it is about our successes. More importantly, it is about how we learn from our failures and try to make them into future successes. As President Obama noted this past weekend looking at the anniversary of a key moment in the history of the United States “what greater patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical....”

The events this week can tell you how the United States came to be a country that respects cultural diversity. The Native American group, the Fancy Dancers, reminds us of our failure to appreciate the wonderful native cultures that existed when the first European settlers arrived. But they, along with the diverse performing group Sphinx, also remind us that we learned from those mistakes and have grown into a country that holds respect for ethnic and cultural diversity among its highest values. Imam Hendi, as a respected American Muslim leader who serves as a chaplain at my alma mater Georgetown University, a university which is proud to be oldest Catholic university in the country, reminds us that although the first settlers fled to escape religious persecution, many weren't favorably inclined toward non-Christians, or even Catholics for that matter. Still, they laid the groundwork for some of the strongest guarantees of religious freedom in the entire world.

What I hope you will see throughout the America Days festival, what you need to know about America, is that what makes us who we are, is that we question ourselves – constantly and unflinchingly. You will find few critics of America stronger than those who live within our own borders. It is our culture of self-examination and the drive to constantly improve that makes us who we are, and makes us strong. We are a work in progress.

Movies, like *Forest Gump*, which takes us through a period of rapid social change from the 1950s to the 1980s, are often a way of examining our past, and are part of that questioning process. A performance by Break of Reality is a live example of how American music develops through the combination of different sounds, in this case rock and jazz. And as Chef Harshbarger can tell you, American cuisine is constantly evolving to incorporate new flavors and influences from all over the world. In fact, the best place to understand the idea of America as a melting pot is probably found in the kitchen.

America Days is a chance for Azerbaijanis to get to know America better. Moreover, it is a chance for Azerbaijanis to be a part of building a stronger relationship between our countries. As I said at the start of this speech, building that relationship is one of my most important tasks as Ambassador. I hope you will all take part in this process by taking part in America Days and in joining me in a deeper on-going dialogue.

Thank you and welcome.