

Ambassador Paul D. Wohlers
Remarks
Reception for Alumni of U.S. Government Exchange Programs
Wednesday, June 13, 2012 – 18:30 p.m.

Good evening and welcome to each and every one of you. I have been looking forward to this event for some time, and I know the members of my Embassy staff who are here today have as well. We do many different things at the U.S. Embassy here in Skopje, meeting people from around this country, speaking to citizens from all walks of life, and working with our Macedonian partners on projects in virtually every sector of society. Our friendship with Macedonia is strengthened by the work we do together every day.

But I have to tell you this: this group is special.

As alumni of U.S. Government exchange programs, you are like family. Someone from this Embassy, whether from years ago or just a few months ago, saw something in each one of you that made him or her believe that you were the perfect person to nominate for an International Visitor Leadership Program, that you were the ideal Fulbright Scholar nominee, or that a year in the U.S. on our Professional Development Year program would have a dramatic impact on your career and your life. The time you spent in the United States means that you probably understand America, and Americans, better than most of your friends and family. And somewhere in the United States, there are Americans who understand Macedonia better because of your time with them.

The State Department's exchange programs also are special. You are among more than 1 million people from around the world who are alumni of our programs, including more than 50 Nobel Laureates and over 350 current and former heads of state and government. So you are in good company.

The word opportunity comes from the Latin term, "ob portus," which means "to the harbor." It refers to the ancient sailing ships that needed a favorable wind to carry them from their protected harbor, out to the open sea, and towards new lands

and adventures. Each of you was given an opportunity to participate in one of these programs, an auspicious wind that carried you from home, and across the seas, to different challenges and adventures. For some of you, I know that it was daunting to leave your home, family, and friends behind to study, observe, and develop new ideas and unfamiliar viewpoints. But I think most of you would agree that this experience affected you in a positive way, and gave you broader insights and understanding than you had before you left Macedonia.

“Ob portus” also refers to the propitious winds that would carry those ancient sailing ships home, back into the harbor. And coming home is, indeed, another opportunity. Each of you brought knowledge, skills, and experiences back with you from your programs to share with family, friends and colleagues. Your stories of time spent in the U.S. help those in your communities to grow from your experiences, and to understand the United States a little better as well.

The father of American Public Diplomacy, the famed journalist Edward R. Murrow, said, “The real crucial link in the international exchange is the last three feet, which is bridged by personal contact, one person talking to another.” It is the last three feet which are so important now. As alumni, you all traveled from home and learned new things; you returned home to Macedonia to bring that new viewpoint and knowledge to your work and life; and now it is so important to speak to one another about how you as alumni can work together to make this country stronger, more prosperous, and more stable, and to put it on the path to full Euro-Atlantic integration. And as we did when you were nominated for your various programs, we still see something special in you, and we are still here to do all we can to help.

So thank you all for being here with us this evening. I hope you have the opportunity to meet some new alumni colleagues this evening, develop new networks, and just have a great time together. This is an alumni reunion actually, and we want you all to enjoy it together.

Thank you.