

## Empowering new democracies Mayor Waters shares her expertise around the globe

By TIFFANY RAZZANO, Tampa Bay Newspapers

Article published on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2017

 [Print](#)  [E-Mail](#)

SEMINOLE – Mayor Leslie Waters is known for organizing meet-and-greets to hear the concerns and questions of Seminole residents. Every few months, she'll set up at a local eatery, Chick-fil-A perhaps, or maybe at a major city event, such as the Music in the Park series.

But not all elected officials around the globe have the luxury of easy access to their constituents or to any of the resources available to community leaders in America. Having trained elected officials in more than a dozen new democracies – such as Mongolia and Moldova – Waters doesn't take for granted the amenities she has access to in Seminole.

She recalled a trip to Somaliland three years ago. Followed by a bodyguard and holed up in a secure compound in Hargeisa, the capital city, she taught four consecutive three-day workshops for new leaders from throughout the country. Many of these new elected officials came from small villages. By day, many were camel or goat herders.

When discussing how to connect with the residents of their villages, Waters suggested they set up a meet-and-greet.

"I asked them if they have a small shop that fixes shoes in their village and told them to get a card table and two chairs, and a sign saying who they are, and set up outside the shop," she said. "If they don't have a table, then they should set up a large box. People will see them and talk to them. You may not have the 10-foot tables that we have at the rec center, but if you're a leader, you make do with what you have."

Since 2004, Waters has traveled to more than a dozen countries around the world, many of them fledgling democracies, where she taught new and female elected officials how to be more effective leaders.

These trips have been through several nonprofit organizations, including the International Republican Institute and the Women's Democracy Network.

These trips aren't about politics, Waters added. Instead, she simply teaches them the basics of running a democracy. Topics range from how to communicate with residents, how to set up town hall meetings and press conferences, and how to budget and plan ahead.

Her most recent trips took place last year. First, she trained 40 of Libya's first-ever women elected to city government. She met the women in Tunisia, since their country is still



Photo submitted by MAYOR LESLIE WATERS  
Mayor Leslie Waters speaks with a class of third-year political science majors at Khovd University in Mongolia.

unstable following the 2011 death of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi.

It's required that one seat on the governing body of each city is held by a woman, she said. She encouraged these women to become strong leaders and also to run for some of the other council seats.

"They're just now evolving to realize they can hold more than one seat," she said.

She was especially impressed by one woman she met, a veterinarian, who was just elected vice mayor of Tripoli, Libya's capital.

"How cool is that?", Waters said. "Through an interpreter she told me she has her sight set on becoming mayor."

In September, she traveled to Mongolia, a land-locked nation between China and Russia. The country has only been a democracy for 26 years. In the city of Kohovd, she trained women leaders and encouraged their increased participation in politics, at both the local and national levels.

Some of the women traveled eight hours in a van across the Mongolian desert to attend Waters' workshop.

"How humbling is that? They put in so much effort to get there," she said. "I told them to please go home and do something good."

Though often there is a language barrier, she is still able to easily connect with the new leaders she trains.

Many of them, even if they are critical of some American politics, idealize American culture, she said.

"They're on their cell phones. They keep up with everything going on in America," Waters said. "They may disagree with our government. But they want to be like America. Our democracy works. I know we gripe and complain, and during the campaign season there are too many darn yard signs. But these people would kill to have the money for yard signs, robo calls, mailings."

In fact, rules and regulations in these countries are often prohibitive, many countries dictating candidates can only receive money from their families.

"It's hindering," Waters said.

She also said that some workshop exercises translate universally. For one ice breaking exercise, she has attendees blow up balloons and try to keep them up in the air with their elbows.

"By the end of it, everybody is laughing, because this is for kids," she said. "They're doing this with saris, with whatever garb they're wearing, and everyone is out there having fun. It's an ice breaker."

She recalled another training workshop in Bosnia, where she trained Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian female elected officials. During the workshop's first day, she had difficulty garnering a reaction from them.

That night, the group went to dinner at a restaurant in a castle. As dinner ended, many of the women headed into a connected tavern to listen to music and dance. One of them grabbed Waters by the arm and dragged her onto the dance floor.

"We danced until 2 a.m.," she said.

They were exhausted at the 8 a.m. workshop, the next day, but the evening out broke the ice.

"The first thing one of them asked was, 'How old are you? You were cutting some moves,'" Waters said. "We were all, like, dead, the next morning, but it was worth it. It broke the ice."

She isn't certain where she will be headed in the new year – though she indicates a couple of trips are tentatively in the works – but she said she's always eager to train new leaders in other parts of the world.

"As long as I have the enthusiasm and the knowledge, I'll go at the drop of a hat," she said.

Article published on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2017

Copyright © Tampa Bay Newspapers: All rights reserved.