

# Reflections of a UN Tour Guide

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My last day of working as a tour guide corresponded with the official launch of the United Nations Children's Tour at UNHQ, which was Monday, 11 February 2013. It was an interesting day that highlighted some of the many intersections between the [Guided Tours Unit](#) (DPI/OD/VSS/GTU) and education. Indeed, on that day, giggles and screams of children could be heard all around.

However, amidst all of the joy and laughter, for me, it was also a day of nostalgia and anxiety (hope) for the new experiences to come at my new post in Public Inquiries (also part of [Visitors' Services](#)).

I joined the UN GTU as a tour guide in September of 2011, after four years of working as a classroom teacher in both the US and in Mexico. I came to New York because I wanted to learn more about the United Nations while continuing to use my teaching skills. It didn't hurt that one of the requirements to be a guide is to be at least bilingual, and I love to practice my Portuguese and Spanish skills.

The first thing I noticed about being a tour guide at the United Nations was that a day in the life of a tour guide has the potential to be much more varied and random than a day in the life of a teacher (which, truly, was pretty hard to imagine at first)—visitors at UNHQ



Michael talking about landmines, UNMAS and disarmament during a tour for UN interns.

come from all over the world, can be anywhere from five years old to over eighty, speak a wide range of levels of English (and/or whichever the language of the tour happens to be) and, of course, come from myriad different cultures, with different questions.

A typical day for a guide at UNHQ might look like this (each tour is about one hour): tour 1- a group of five-year-olds from Manhattan; tour 2- a group of international affairs master's degree candidates; tour 3- a public tour consisting of a range of ages and nationalities, 4- administrative duties; tour 5- a group of middle school students that were dragged by their teacher to the UN, but would rather be elsewhere. From this, it is clear to see that, for a tour guide, flexibility and adaptability are necessary to do a good job.



Jacky, from Malaysia, discusses the GA on a tour for the public.

As can be imagined, speaking to children is very different from speaking to adults. While this is obvious, teaching children about the United Nations in terms they can understand, while truly helping them to figure out this Organization, is exceptionally difficult, even for an experienced teacher. Over time, the guides realized that the most difficult group to adapt to was younger students. So to address this, a few tour guides decided to design a tour, with materials and activities specifically for children. While I had a tiny part in the development of the Children's tour, most of the credit goes to some of my colleagues who were already in the GTU before I had arrived. Upon designing this new tour, these same guides showed us how to implement the activities, talk to children of different ages, etc. After various pre-launch trials (in which I played a greater role) and feedback from different parents, teachers, and children, the current Children's Tour was launched. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the ceremony to officially launch the tour, and so began my last day as a tour guide.

Ironically enough, I didn't get the opportunity to do any Children's tours on my last day, even though I conducted many of the test groups beforehand. I was, however, fortunate enough to be able to walk around, observe and photograph the first few tours in order to post photos on my Twitter account for guided tours ([@VisitUNMichael](#)) to promote the day's events.

It was impressive to see mostly young students on the tour route, in large groups, everywhere: sitting in circles on the floor talking about the Security Council, matching the flags of the five permanent members with their names using the UN Children's Tour Compass (activity booklet); running around playing "The Human



Students on inauguration day of the Children's Tour marvel at Cesar Lopez' Escopetarra, an electric guitar made out of a converted AK-47.

Rights Game", where the guide asks the students to divide into groups based on different categories (things they are born with, things they choose, their physical characteristics, etc.) to highlight how discrimination can lead to exclusion and, ultimately, the violation of human rights, while promoting the importance of tolerance; or standing in the General Assembly Hall, trying to figure out what "Welcome" looks like in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish (or English).

I also had the chance to sit with some children while they waited for their tour to start in the lobby of the General Assembly building. I gave them temporary tattoo/stamps of Blue Helmets and the UN logo, distributed stickers of the UN Kids (characters that are part of the Children's Tour), and also assisted them with completing an MDG maze (where they learn about the MDGs while completing a maze), which also tries to teach realism at the same time—you can't solve all of the world's problems at once, so you might have to do the maze multiple times to attempt to solve all of the MDGs.



Saae, from Republic of Korea, discusses UNICEF on the Children's Tour.

By the end of the day, everyone was extremely tired, but very satisfied. According to most, the Children's tour launch was a great success! Indeed, you could feel an electricity of excitement in the air. But, of course, as it is just the beginning, the Children's Tour is focused on improvement and Visitors' Services is taking feedback from participants, parents, and tour guides alike to deliver the best service possible to visitors at the UN.

My last day was a tiring day. As it ended, I couldn't help but miss all of the tourists (sometimes indignant, sometimes full of praise about the UN); the different interactions with people from everywhere; the difficult questions; in other words, the human contact. I wondered if my new post (which is only a temporary job opening, and, thus, maybe it wasn't really my last day!) would offer the same level of excitement. Would working in Public Inquiries offer the same feeling of joy that a teacher or tour guide feels when a student or tourist gets the "I learned something new" look on their face?

Thanks, and goodbye for now, GTU.