

LOCAL

Former Topekan goes to the COP30 United Nations summit in Brazil



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Key Points AI-assisted summary

Boston College engineering professor Emma Brace attended the United Nations COP30 climate change summit in Brazil.

Brace, a Topeka High School alumna, found the summit surprisingly similar to her high school Model UN experiences.

The Conference of Parties (COP) is an annual UN meeting where countries address climate change.

Brace encourages educators to discuss climate change with students and advises students to pursue their passions.

Emma Brace was in Model UN as a Topeka High School student in the early to mid-2000s.

Twenty years later, her life would come full circle and she was invited to go to an actual United Nations summit.

"I applied to be part of BC's (Boston College's) delegation because I really like how my research intersects with environmental impacts and climate change," Brace said. "I thought it would be a very cool experience to get to help contextualize my own work and see how it fits into, in a small way, global efforts to combat climate change."

Brace is an engineering professor at Boston College and specializes in environmental studies, including biofuel and bioenergy. She had the opportunity in

November to take some of her students to Belém, Brazil, to participate in the United Nations climate change meeting known as the "COP30."

"While I was there at COP, I was really stunned to see how realistic both Model UN and these mock negotiations we did were to the real thing," Brace said. "Like it really is just — I feel like definitely me and I think a lot of people, we imagine UN diplomats and climate negotiators as these sort of really special people, but ultimately like they are just people."

"They come in and they're tired and they need coffee and they're chatting with their co-workers about their kids, as we all do in our jobs, and then it's like, 'OK, time to get to work,' and suddenly they're negotiating how many billions of dollars their country's going to commit to clean energy."

"So it's really just kind of eye-opening to see how human it is and also very cool to see how kind of realistic Model UN is. It really made me think back on the value in those experiences that I had."

What is the COP30?

The first COP, the Conference of Parties, took place in 1995 and has since met annually to let countries come together to address climate change. The COP is the "supreme decision-making body" of the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change.

This year, world leaders met Nov. 10-21 in Brazil to make a climate deal. The United States declined to send a delegate this year. Previous climate deals include, most famously, the Paris Agreement, which was made a decade ago, Brace said.

Emma Brace reflects on her upbringing in Topeka

Brace said many moments in her life led her to become a researcher in biofuels and other forms of environmental engineering. Two formative times were getting to go on a Girl Scout trip to Kansas State University to learn about engineering from the Society of Women Engineers and participating in her high school biology class.

"I had a great biology teacher at Topeka High, Kerry Zimmerman, who I think recently retired and decided I wanted to study biological engineering," Brace said. "I actually thought going into college that I wanted to be more of a biomedical engineer, working on things like pharmaceuticals, cancer treatment, things like that, and then, while I was in college, I was in an undergraduate research program that placed me in a lab that worked on ethanol. I really liked it and found it really interesting and I started learning more about biofuels and bioenergy."

"I feel like, while I was growing up in Kansas, wind farms were really starting to be built and learning about that and new potential energy sources in the Midwest was really inspiring to me."

Brace said she also greatly enjoyed her time as a Model UN student.

"I feel like that gave me a really important foundation to understanding how the United Nations works, although I certainly never thought that I would end up there," Brace said.

While current Topeka High principal Dustin Dick wasn't there when Brace was in school, he said he is glad to see an alumna achieve so much after graduation.

"There is nothing more fulfilling than seeing Topeka High alumni carry the confidence, curiosity and global perspective they built through their high school experiences in programs like Model United Nations into successful, meaningful lives," Dick said. "Their achievements remind us that the experiences they have here don't just shape students — they shape futures."

When asked what words of encouragement or advice she has for teachers, Brace encouraged educators not to shy away from tough conversations about climate change.

"I think it's something that students really care about and want to learn about," Brace said. "I think today's students are very cognizant of the world that they're

inheriting and the way that it's changing and want to learn about these topics. It can be, I think, hard as an educator to approach them, but I think it's important."

She said the next generation of Topeka High Trojans will have endless opportunities to make an impact.

"(I) never imagined I would end up at a UN meeting, but there are so many interesting pathways that life can take you that you can't predict," Brace said. "More specifically, if you're interested in environmental work and this type of thing, just keep at it and follow your interests. I think life has taken a lot of turns that I didn't predict, but I feel like things have ended up where they should be.

"And so, if you work on things that you're passionate about, find a job that you care about and you find meaningful, you can end up where you want to be and also end up with opportunities to make small impacts on the world."