David Stanley's Speech for the United Nations – October 8, 2026

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Seven years ago, I came to the United Nations as part of my Churchill Fellowship. I remember looking around this place, built to bring the nations of the world together, and wondering where the people like my students were.

People with learning and developmental disabilities, whose lives are affected by the decisions made here. I wanted to hear their voices. I wanted them to have the chance to represent their country and show the world what they could do.

I made myself a promise: one day, we would return and bring my students with me.

Tonight, they are here.

Thank you, Ambassador Young and our hosts at the UK Mission, for welcoming us. Thank you to Penny Mordaunt for your friendship and support for these musicians.

We want to give particular thanks to Chris Lewis and everyone at TEAM LEWIS. They have backed these musicians with generosity and practical support, helping bring their work to audiences far beyond our own community. This week has taken years of commitment. Chris and his colleagues have helped us see it through, and we are deeply grateful.

To our families, carers, teachers and volunteers, thank you for everything you have done to get us here and for the work you do every week to make these opportunities possible.

I'm David Stanley, founder of The Music Man Project. My work began 27 years ago with one student in Southend-on-Sea. I believed he deserved the same opportunities to learn music and perform as anyone else. I could never have imagined where that first lesson would lead.

Today, there are 27 regional Music Man Projects across the United Kingdom, teaching nearly a thousand students. Our work and partnerships have reached five continents.

These musicians have performed at the London Palladium and the Royal Albert Hall. They have played for His Majesty King Charles III. Last night, they performed at The Town Hall here in New York.

We know the years of work behind those performances. To the musicians here with me: you have earned every round of applause. Last night, you showed New York what you could do. Tonight, you are representing your country at the United Nations. We are immensely proud of you.
There is someone who should have been here to share this moment. Our late president, Sir David Amess.

Sir David believed in these musicians. He spoke about them in Parliament, championed their performances and persuaded others to see what he saw in them. He wanted to bring them to New York.

In October 2021, he was murdered while serving his constituents. We lost a dear friend. Our musicians lost someone who had always been on their side.

He would have loved this week. We want the opportunities we create for these musicians, and for those who follow them, to be part of his legacy.

DANIEL
We stop to think about our own lives and the journey we've all been on. We think about the labels given to us as babies and how far we've come. We think about the people we've lost along the way, like Sir David, like our friends, our family... my dad.

DAVID
Thank you, Daniel.

The labels Daniel speaks about can follow a person throughout their life. They can influence what adults expect of a child, what that child is taught and which opportunities they are offered.

We have a responsibility to question those expectations. When someone has never had a music lesson or been given the chance to perform, we cannot know what they might achieve. We owe them the opportunity to find out.

Music has given these students a way to express themselves and share something of their own with the world. Their performances have changed what audiences expect of people with learning disabilities. They have certainly changed what I thought was possible.

I want what we do to become normal.

It should be possible for a family to find a music teacher who can support their child. For a musician with a disability to be considered for a concert programme. Everyone should be able to recognise themselves in the cultural life of their country.

The United Nations has made a promise to leave no one behind. That promise includes the right to take part in cultural life.

Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for people with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and use their creative and artistic potential. It recognises the contribution they can make to society.

The right to take part belongs equally to the child beginning their first lesson and the musician performing at the Royal Albert Hall. Our responsibility is to ensure that people can exercise it.

That requires regular teaching, accessible rehearsal space and opportunities to perform.

Governments and cultural institutions help decide whether those opportunities exist. People in this room have the influence to create more of them.

The Paralympics have helped the world recognise disabled sporting talent. As has the brilliant Special Olympics. We should show the same ambition for musicians and other artists with disabilities. A child watching someone like themselves on a great stage can begin to imagine a different future. We should take that possibility seriously.

There are organisations across the world working towards that. They have experience to share and musicians who could learn from one another.

Last year, we helped establish the International Alliance of Accessible Music with AllegroModerato in Italy. Through the alliance, organisations can share teaching methods and music, support one another and arrange performances together.

This week, our musicians sang "Lean on Me" with performers from AHRC New York City's Our Broadway programme. Parents in the room were moved to tears. We want many more musicians and families to have the chance to share an experience like that.

Tonight, here at the United Nations, we are inviting every country represented in this room to help us build that alliance. Together, we can give more musicians the chance to learn from one another and perform beyond their own communities.

We are asking each delegation for one practical commitment. Identify an organisation in your country working with musicians with learning or developmental disabilities and introduce us. Where that work is not yet happening, connect us with someone who wants to start.

Help us reach the people responsible for arts funding and cultural programmes. We want to work with them so that more people can learn music and perform in their own communities, as well as beyond them.

For those who lead venues and festivals, we ask you to include musicians with disabilities in your programmes and work with them on the support they need. For those who can fund music education, please help provide the regular teaching and rehearsal time on which every musician depends.

The musicians themselves must help lead this work. Ask them what they want to achieve and involve them in deciding how to get there. Their voices belong in those decisions.

Before you leave tonight, please speak to me or one of our team. Tell us who you can introduce us to or what you can help provide. Let us agree a next step, and please make those introductions before the end of October.

The success of this evening will be in what follows it. A student getting their first music lesson or a group of musicians receiving an invitation to perform. Those are changes we can help bring about together.

Twenty-seven years ago, Music Man Project began with one student. Somewhere in your country, there will be someone waiting for that same chance to begin.

Our musicians have a word for what happens when different voices and different notes come together.

What do we call it?

MUSICIANS
Harmony!

WENDY
We want more harmony in the world.

DAVID
So do I, Wendy.

Seven years ago, I left this building determined to bring my students back with me. They have fulfilled that hope beyond anything I could have imagined.

When we next return, we want musicians from the countries represented here to be alongside us. We want them to be able to look around this room and recognise the people who helped them get there.

That can begin with an introduction you make tonight.

Thank you.