

Governor's Institute of Vermont 2017
Natalie Hughes - Marco Island Academy

It's now a month and two days after twelve of the most amazing day of my life that I am writing this and it truthfully feels like just yesterday that I was sitting on the balcony, eating breakfast with my three best Vermont friends. I still wake up from an afternoon nap thinking that I'll walk outside to find the most amazing people from all over the world playing an intense round of "Street Volleyball". However, only a week before my trip to Vermont, I didn't think it would be as life changing as it truly was.

I have to admit that from the day I found out about the flight schedule, I was dreading the fateful morning that I had to wake up at 3 AM for *just a trip*. (Obviously, little did I know that this was going to be more than a trip). My mind was numb from only getting about four hours of sleep, but that didn't stop me from jumping up and down as we got off the plane in Hartford, CT. My heart was racing as my fellow Collier County scholarship winners and I introduced ourselves to Michelle (one of the chaperones), the students from Pittsburgh and Liz from Texas. As the twelve of us waited for our last "out-of-towner" to arrive, we all had already started fantasizing about the amazing classes we would take and the wonderful people we would be fortunate enough to meet along the way. Because of our little plane delay, we got the chance to ride in the van with people from all over our country, including two of my closest friends I met on this adventure. We were also lucky enough to be there first people to check out the campus and by golly was this the most gorgeous campus I have ever seen. I can still sit here today and picture the rolling green mountains as vividly as if I were there.

Sure, the first day was so much, seeing as we got the lay of the land and had the chance to form close bonds with each other so early. But the most interesting parts of the Governor's Institute of Vermont were the classes we got to take. Before this, I didn't have a huge amount of faith in my generation or my future. It's sad to say that I know plenty of people who couldn't care less about what is going on around the world. However, as I sat in a class of approximately forty people who were intently listening to the former Mayor of Rutland, I couldn't have been more proud of my generation. Everyone I met in Vermont was so passionate about change and making our world a better place. The time I felt most heart warmed by students my age was in my issue group, Leadership, led by Ken Williams. There was a girl named Ashling from Ireland who kept telling the most dazzling tales of the volunteer work she had done across the pond. In only six days, she had inspired me to get out of my comfort zone, get more active in my community, and push others to do the same.

Speaking of my Leadership Issue Group, I couldn't be happier to say that I had the time of my life in this six day long course. Our little group focused mainly on what makes a good leader vs. an effective leader. We had long and intense discussions

about morals and were even forced to analyze ourselves, why we wanted to be leaders, and the type of leadership we currently display. Ken was a fabulous instructor who didn't ever talk down to us and pushed us to think outside the box (literally sometimes). This class was also where I met some of the greatest friends I have ever made - Nastia, Matthew and Alex - and where I also met my current best friend, Owen.

One of the most interesting things I experienced while in Vermont was probably our Mock UN. The group I was in was very interesting as there were a bunch of differing personalities in such a small group. Funnily enough, I was partners with my friend Nastia (who is from Russia) and we got to be Russia in the Model UN. The whole discussion was about what all the countries are going to do regarding global warming and it got pretty interesting. There were a lot of laughs within our group, considering that Nastia wanted to be Putin and the girls who were representing the USA were acting like Trump. However, we all came to a conclusion and agreed that there should be something done about the global warming issue.

Despite all of the classes and lectures being absolutely amazing and insightful, I have to admit that the greatest part about being at the 2017 Governor's Institute on Current Issues and Youth Activism were the relationships I made with peers. From day one, I had latched onto three of the most beautiful people (and souls) that I have encountered to this day. We four spent our days and nights conversing about our past, present, and future as if we had been friends for decades. It was so spectacular to step out of my comfort zone and open up to people who are as passionate about certain things as I am. I also really enjoyed hearing what life is like for students not from America, like the students from Spain. Not only were their accents captivating, but the stories they told were too. I'm completely certain that the friendships I procured in Vermont will last a lifetime as they've already lasted over a month - I've spoken to all of the close friends I made every day since their departure!

I'm eternally grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for blessing me with such an amazing scholarship that led to the opportunity of a lifetime. And I truly couldn't be happier to call Brattleboro, Vermont my second home now.