

Autumn Crosley –Naples High School

When I was on the airplane flying up to Vermont, I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the program I was about to attend. I had repeatedly heard that this was going to be a wonderful experience, something I would never forget, but I didn't know how that would come to be true for me. Now that I am home, I realize how unquestionably life changing my time there was.

The campers, counselors, and instructors all contributed to an atmosphere at the camp that was open minded and accepting. It was an environment where I was able to constantly have intellectual discussions and debates with those around me. A place where I was exposed to an incredible variety of perspectives on numerous issues and topics. The classes and workshops I participated in taught me about things that I had been oblivious to before, and hearing about the lives of the other campers altered many of my previously held opinions and mindsets. I have never felt so loved, respected, and extremely comfortable with being myself like I did while I was there. This camp has given me great friends; an awareness of events happening throughout our world; and a better understanding of how I can help facilitate change.

During Camp I had the chance to take part in a "mock congress" simulation. For the activity we were put into groups and given a bill that we would collectively decide to pass, kill, or revise. The bill we were going to make decisions on would make fracking easier for corporations by removing some environmental regulations. Before our group made any decisions about the bill two counselors acted as lobbyists and spoke with us. Many of us had already taken an environmental class on the issue so we tried to keep an open mind when the pro-fracking lobbyist spoke to us. Although we disagreed with stance of the pro-fracking lobbyist, we took into consideration many of his points, like how jobs would be affected if America switched to renewable energy sources.

This simulation emphasized for me the value of being educated about an issue. As a representative, understanding all aspects of an issue enables you to make more informed decisions for the people you are deciding for. If all aspects of an issue are not considered then there may be groups of people who are affected

negatively, like those that would lose their jobs from switching to renewable energy sources. Considering all aspects of an issue allows you to prevent a problem before it occurs.

In the United Nations (UN) simulation a partner and I became representatives of Jordan. Before beginning we were told that the purpose of the activity was to role play the UN trying to solve the crisis in Syria. We were given a paper before the simulation that summarized the crisis; how it was affecting our country (Jordan); and what our goals were while at the meeting. Every country including ours, had their own objectives, which at first made solving the crisis challenging and frustrating because it seemed many of the powerful countries were more focused on what they could gain from the situation rather than what they could do to aid Syrian refugees and the people still in Syria.

Thankfully though, during the break where all the countries could talk to one another my partner and I managed to get a large group of countries together who weren't blinded by their self-interest, and we developed a plan for how to assist the refugees, remove the president from power, and give the country back to its people. Our group's proposal was the clearest, most progressive, and well thought out plan. And it was also the proposal that almost passed during the meeting. One country with more weight behind its vote vetoed our plan. From this simulation I began to comprehend the frustration that comes when corrupt governments and people refuse to change something because they benefit from the conflict. Additionally I was able to witness the power of a clear and well-spoken speech.

At the start of the program all of the campers had to choose one of the five "issue groups" or classes on a particular topic to take while we were at camp. Some of the class options were "Religion"; "Leadership"; "Youth I.D. and Social Justice"; and "Global Social Change." I chose an issue group called "Politics" because the way the government and politics functioned had always been something I hadn't understood. In the class I learned an incredible amount about how politics work and we had numerous entertaining and interesting discussions about this upcoming election. We also predicted and debated the conditions our country may be in with the various candidates in office. I absolutely loved this class and the professor who was kind, entertaining, intellectual, and an exceptional human being. Our class had so many discussions; we were taught so many new things; and I was given a concrete understanding about how the government works.

Another activity at camp I participated in was a forum theater group that focused on creative writing. We called our meeting place a "Nook for Rhyme Crooks," and there we were given the opportunity to write about things that we were passionate about and share them with one another. Our group became a close-knit family that appreciated and respected each other's written pieces and personalities. The written pieces of the others in the group brought to my attention circumstances that drastically affect their lives. It caused me to more fully grasp the pain and suffering it causes them. Now that I have more insight about their situation I have become more empathetic and I feel more driven to help bring about change so that their situation will improve. The time I spent in the "Nook for Rhyme Crooks" caused me to gain confidence in my inner voice and a passion to use that inner voice for those who are unable to.

At one point during camp we learned about drone strikes, something I had no prior knowledge about. We were taught about how they affect communities, families, and individual people. How it shapes people's perspectives of America and how ultimately it has helped create terrorism. I find it ridiculous how little I knew about this issue before and I am incredibly thankful that I am now aware of it.

On the first day of camp there was point where it was just those from Spain and our group from Florida. We all ended up on a field playing soccer, laughing, and getting to know one another. At another point that week, a few friends from Chicago and I were playing a very hilarious game of soccer with the Iraqi students who had just arrived. I treasure both experiences because of the fun I had and the awesome people I was able to laugh and connect with.

While at camp I also spent time in a dialogue with the Iraqi students, which was a time where we got to know one another and hear about each other's lives. During this dialogue I discovered that the person I was talking to and I had many of the same interests and we were able to bond quickly because of that. Talking to this person allowed me to have the revelation that although we all come from different places and cultures, we are all still similar. We are all human beings capable of loving and laughing with one another; and we are all adventurers on a journey through life.

One thing that fascinated me while in Vermont was how much composting was integrated into the community and everyday life. While at the camp we threw any leftover food and compostable paper napkins,

cups, etc. into a compost bin. In the Brattleboro town we did the same thing. I admire the people of Vermont for coming together and taking action to protect the environment by composting. Seeing this in Vermont has inspired me and shown me that it is not impossible to bring a community together to care for their environment.

Another aspect of Vermont and the camp that I appreciate were the gender neutral bathrooms. Living in a place where they were used helped me realize that many of the fears people have about them are either blown out of proportion or completely false.

At the camp we had a documentary night and were given a few different movie options to choose from. I chose to watch a documentary about the Egyptian revolution. The counselor, Mohi, who was playing the movie for us had actually been there during the entire revolution. Because Mohi had experienced it firsthand I was able to ask him in-depth questions, which is not an opportunity that comes very often. The movie and my talk with Mohi brought to my attention how necessary unity is if a nation is to change.

One night towards the end of the program we had a barn dance where I learned quite a few new dances and was able to have an amazing time with my new, but close friends.

On July fourth all of the students and counselors from all of the programs there came together and marched through Brattleboro with signs we had made the day before. I was able to ask my friends about their signs and understand more about issues I had never heard about before. I learned about immigration laws that are ridiculously detrimental and about education policies that hinder a student from receiving the schooling they need. The support I saw, heard, and felt from the community, and the energy of the campers made me recognize again and again that I was contributing to something much bigger than myself. I was given experience in peacefully protesting which allowed me to feel comfortable when I returned home and participated in a “Black Lives Matter” protest.

On the second night at the camp we played hand drums with an immensely talented and skilled instructor. The sound of everyone playing the drums together in rhythm was incredibly beautiful and powerful. My arms and hands hitting the drums felt like wings flapping so that my soul could soar. At a later point during the session some of the students including myself went into the center of the room and began dancing, while the others

continued to play the drums. I loved this because while I was in front of everyone, I decided to just let go of my insecurities about being watched by so many people, and I just danced and enjoyed the moment.

This program has completely changed my life.

At the camp I discovered some of the many paths a person can take in life and I no longer feel confined to a certain lifestyle. Furthermore, I no longer feel isolated because I learned about so many different places in the world where I could live.

I was able to talk to the fantastic counselors and find out information about many different majors in college. Talking to them helped me decide that I'd like to study International Relations or Political Science in college (while also becoming a polyglot).

I now have friendships with people from all over the world (Ireland, Florida, Spain, Chicago, New York, Bosnia, Vermont, Iraq, Germany, Egypt, and Britain) that are filled with love, hilarious memories, and an unbelievable amount of support for one another. I am a stronger and more confident person, and I feel comfortable and prepared to use my voice and my actions to lead others.

The Governor's Institute of Vermont on Current Issues and Youth Activism pushed me to step out of my comfort zone and has prepared me with the knowledge and skills to make a difference in this world. I will use everything I have taken and learned from these two weeks to help make the world a better place, and to continue to grow and blossom as a person.

From the bottom of my heart I'd like to thank the Naples Council of World Affairs for this truly once in a life time opportunity that I will never forget. Thank you Mrs. Debbie Doyle for all the time, effort, calls, and emails you sent to make our experience as phenomenal and memorable as it was. Furthermore, I'd like to thank Mr. Godley and Mr. Saba for giving me the approval to use the William Godley Memorial Scholarship to pay for my trip to Vermont and back. And thank you to Mrs. Berryman, Mr. Berning, and Mrs. Morton for the assistance, encouragement, and guidance you gave me when I first applied to this program.

Thank you to everyone involved for caring about the future of this world by making today's youth into global citizens.