

Medjine Abellard- Golden Gate High School -GIV 2016

Some things are a blessing in the disguise, I would've never guessed that an Instagram picture would create an opportunity of a lifetime. I found out about the program sponsored by the Naples Council on World Affairs via social media and I was granted a scholarship to attend a Government Institute of Vermont on current issues and youth activism. The program consisted of 89 students from all around the world Ireland, Spain, Bosnia, Florida, Germany, Illinois, Iraq, New York, and Vermont. We took part in many group activities, simulations, discussions and workshops. As presentations were given to select one of the workshops, I was immediately drawn to the Leadership Workshop. In the leadership workshop, our instructor, Mr. Ken was a humble man from Barbados. He spoke of his leadership role in Barbados and in the United States, he gave brief yet inspiring stories of his life. The first day, we went over the whole idea of a Leader and its role in society. Throughout the workshop, we discussed qualities of a leader, what makes a leader great, and how birth order affects your leadership. Growing up as the oldest, I always took the lead and responsibility of the younger ones which he explained was why I have potential to be a leader. I enjoyed this workshop and learned so much, Mr. Ken sparked hope in my heart of the potential that I have to be a great leader. I enjoyed every minute of it, the laughter, the silence of the room, the shouting, the discussions. Every moment was filled with knowledge and joy.

Later on in the program, we took part in a Model UN simulation. As a former Model UN member for my school I was quite intrigued. We discussed the Syrian Crisis/ I was China and my stance was that we shouldn't intervene in Syria's conflict; however, we should send humanitarian help. Other countries were against my views; however, I stood by them through the whole simulation. During the caucuses, some countries attempted to get me to join in creating a greater solution but I wasn't willing to compromise like China in the United Nations.

The program had other aspects such as speakers. The most memorable speaker was a member of the Black Lives Matter organization. She spoke of what the BLM organization is and what they do. I already knew a substantial amount of information on the BLM, but I was still interested in learning more. She was my favorite speaker; she explicitly told the truth about the discrimination African Americans face and the horrific reality that African Americans live with. Her sorrowed voice still lingers in my head, as she spoke of an incident that occurred to

her. She inspired me to speak up against unspeakable things and to let my voice be heard.

During the program, I met incredible students that changed my perception of life as a whole. I've heard stories of Iraq. I've heard stories of their life and struggles, but I've never heard the truth until I met the students from Iraq. I was deceived on the nature of the Iraqi people; they are not destructive, they are not evil, they are not freaks but they are lovers and healers. The first time the Iraqi students approached me, a wide smile was spread upon their face, they hugged me and asked my name. They did not take a second to analyze me, they approached me with friendship and invited me to lunch to eat with them. During lunch, they informed me of their beliefs. I felt a sorrow as I spoke with them because their country is in a state of war. While I was feeling sorry for them, they were feeling hopeful for themselves. They encouraged me to look for the positive in life, to gain a better understanding in life, and to help change the world. They were so sweet, kind, and especially patient as I overwhelmed with questions about their culture, religion, and school. They answered every question and did not hesitate to tell some of the ugly truth. They were brave to tell me what things were like and I appreciated it. They were open to everything I offered such as playing UNO, which they never played before. Also, they invited me to pray with them the next day with the group. The prayer was really sentimental and uplifting, I loved the way they prayed in silence and all the special procedures conducted in praying to Allah. I felt the Holy Spirit surrounding me, I felt my God's presence. We all prayed to different Gods but we prayed for the same thing: love, peace, and health.

Every student that I met during the program impacted me in different ways, they all brought something unique to the program. Although, I came with students from Naples, the whole time I drifted from them and found myself engaged with the international students instead. One of my closest friends from the program was from Eva from Spain. She was so open to talking to me and revealing herself and her life story. Throughout the program, we participated in group activities to learn about each other and to get closer as friends. We became a great big family, we learned to accept one another as individuals; we learned to love each other. I didn't spend two weeks with strangers, I spent it with family. Everyone became really close with one another, and I gained new sisters and brothers. Every student was accepting, and very open minded, we shared the same values, thoughts, feelings, and love. The hardest thing about the program was parting ways, and going back to reality. The day I hugged them good bye, my heart ached with pain but in the end I

know we will meet again some way and somehow. The time isn't specified nor the location, but I know it wasn't a final good bye, it was more of a 'see you later'. With everyone that I met and the memories that I made, I am forever thankful for the experience.

At first, I wasn't sure of what I wanted to do in life. But after the program, I know I've found my calling in life. By meeting different people, emphasizing the amount of issues in today's society, and discussing possible solutions, I want to dedicate my life to helping others and creating new opportunities for the upcoming generations. I've learned so much about myself and the great opportunities ahead of me. I feel ready to embark on new projects and to inform others that change can be made. I feel blessed to have been part of this program, and I owe it all to Naples Council of World Affairs. Thank you so much.