

Governor's Institute of Vermont: Current Issues and Youth Activism 2017

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Post 2016 election season was the ideal time to attend the Governor's Institute on Current Events and Youth Activism. Tensions were high, emotions were raw, and global issues were personal. Students traveled from many a places: Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, Spain, Germany, Iraq, Ireland, and different towns within Vermont (the state where the program was held). Each different location brought a unique perspective and a life-changing opportunity of friendship and way of living life. Especially coming from Collier County, it was eye-opening to be submerged into a blue bubble considering how red this community is (politically speaking). No experience is good or bad, just different - until you label it. Vermont was refreshingly different than my daily life living on Marco Island, Florida, and was the sunshine necessary for my flowering mental growth.

I attended a class called World Religion and Violence for six days out of the twelve days of the program. Before any discussions took place, we began by meditating together as a class. I wasn't sure if it was the coffee or just my jittering mind that made sitting in silence and reflecting upon life's gifts increasingly difficult. Either way, my first "metta" meditation reminded me to slow down in life, and remember to take a pause. The importance of a pause should never be underestimated, which was where the professor introduced his first quote to us by Victor E. Frankl, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." I carried this quote in

the back of my mind for the remainder of the program, which enriched the already impactful twelve days of my time spent there. We also hummed together as a class. It sounds strange - I know. At first, the entire class was hesitant. But as we released the rumbling of our vocal chords in a peaceful harmony, a bond was tied between each of my classmates that words cannot recreate with due justice. This was the teacher's way of allowing everybody's voice to be heard, even if they chose not to speak in class that day. As for the content of the class - I won't spoil that for future World Religion and Violence students who attend Governor's Institute.

There were two days within Governor's Institute designated to a mock congress and a model United Nations. During the model UN, I represented the country Bangladesh as we discussed climate change. Being that the United States had recently pulled out of the Paris Accord, it was definitely a hot topic. I learned that Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries, but also one of the poorest. Ironically, it is also the country most affected by climate change. Climate change has already begun to affect the coastal line, and in as little as 15-20 years, the coast will be so significantly eroded that there will be climate refugees. The term "climate refugees" was a new concept to me, and I was eager to learn more. The model UN made me realize that powerful countries such as the United States, France, and England need to use their influential presence to help out countries that contribute to a large portion of the global population. These countries are the voices for the unheard, which places an immense amount of pressure on them for making the morally correct (a very subjective word) decision. I learned the innerworking of the chessboard of global politics, and how influential money is in the role of making decisions. During the mock congress, my group and I discussed the amendments we needed to make to the transgender bathroom legislation. Lobbyist tried to convince us to veto or

pass the bill, each coming with a large bias and personal interest. Ultimately, my group decided on alterations that considered a myriad of perspectives and benefited both interests.

Some of the strongest bonds I made were with students from Iraq. At first, a counselor spoke to all of the students besides the Iraqis and reminded us to be considerate with our questions - don't jump right into ISIS or bombs and the likes. My now good friend and mentor, Maitham (an adult leader from Iraq) sat down with my fellow Collier County resident, Jessica, and I the first day he arrived. He introduced us to two students, Fatima and Sofie. We sat around the lunch table casually talking about the weather differences when Maitham interjected, "Come on! Aren't you guys going to ask about women's rights and ISIS?" Jessica, my friend Alex from Spain, and I burst out laughing. The tension was broken and the Iraqi students were eager to share their experiences with us. We shared bits and pieces from each of our own cultural treasures, a lot having to do with language (Salama lakem is the arabic way of greeting another person) but also some scrumptious cooking recipes. Us six grew closer and closer throughout the entire program. I realized despite the thousands of kilometers that separate our newfound friend group, there are constant similarities that are present within each of us. For starters, Jessica, Alex, Fatima and I can't seem to ever stop talking. While I made friendships with most of the Iraqi students, the closer I got with them, the more discouraged I became of our United States society and the preconceived notions humans place on other humans. Though by the end of the two week, Governor's Institute gave me hope to turn that disappointment into action. I will not stand idly by as opportunity for change sits right in front of me.

Spending twelve days with so many different types of people voicing their opinion truly opened my eyes to an understanding once beyond my grasp. In every worldly conversation I

have had since the trip, I notice my consideration of my friend Ashling in Ireland and my friend Aboss from Iraq and my other friend Analise from Germany. I am reminded of each of their experiences, *real*, life experiences that create the world we live in. With all of the technology in today's society, a once unfathomably colossal Earth has become a single neighborhood - "love thy neighbor". No matter how political most (if not all) current events become, attending this program was vital for an educational growth experience. It is the interconnectedness of humans that makes us all, well, human. Governor's Institute provided the link between ideas and stories of the world to the connection with the people who are the living, breathing souls behind those stories. It reinforced my longing for world travels for the sole purpose of gaining a more dynamic perspective on life, and cultivated a newfound love for the once despised topic of politics. I am forever grateful for my experiences at Governor's Institute and will continue to develop the relationships I made up in Vermont, hoping for a trip to visit Alex in Spain soon. The people who say they are scared for when our generation becomes the adults of the world have clearly never been surrounded by the 90 changemakers who surrounded me for twelve days. We are the future, and I could not have been reassured of our generation anymore than by attending this program. There is hope, and it is in the hands of today's youth.

Thank you, Naples Council on World Affairs.

****For a glimpse of what Governor's Institute will be like search "GICIYA 2017" on Youtube****