

Young Leaders Handed Keys To Corridors of Power

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A new program introduces young community leaders to the world of Washington politics. As their careers develop, they will stay in touch.



For Mark Stevens, 16, growing up interested in politics doesn't go over so big in his hometown of Landover, Md. Active in student government and a volunteer worker for the Share Food Network, Stevens says kids his age generally think he is boring.

"They say, 'You're boring, you like CSPAN,'" Stevens said. But this summer, while his classmates back home were hanging out at the mall, Stevens was having dinner with Madeleine Albright and being interviewed by reporters from the Washington Post.

The mock Official Dinner was part of the first session of the St. Albans School of Public Service in Washington, D.C. which took place June 24 through July 19.

The innovative program aims to teach young community leaders about the inner workings of the federal government and inspire them to take leadership roles in their communities. Program administrators will track these and future students through their senior year of high school, college and into their adult lives through e-mail and other networking groups.

After meeting dozens of public servants, from FBI agents to the Australian ambassador, as well as 28 other high school students with similar interests, Stevens feels reassured. "Coming here I've met people interested in the same issues I am. We're the next politicians."

Partnering with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, which also has a mission of engaging youth in civic action, the four-week program took students who are entering their senior year of high school into the Supreme Court, Congress, and the White House, where they met staff and got a close-up view of politics at work in the nation's capital.

Students were introduced to former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and former attorney general Dick Thornberg as well as Hugh Sidey, Time Magazine's Washington contributing editor, and several reporters for the Washington Post.

They went to tapings of "Meet the Press", "NewsHour" and "Hardball", debated the death penalty with the lawyer who prosecuted Timothy McVeigh, and staged a mock presidential campaign.

In the Supreme Court, students met Francis Lorson, who in his 30 years as chief deputy clerk has managed many of the court cases the students had studied in class. They received a package of information including actual court documents and learned the process by which cases are brought through the Supreme Court. At the White House, students toured the cabinet room and Oval Office, noted how "clean" the President's desk was, and spoke with Joshua Bolten, deputy chief of staff, and Ron Christie, special assistant to the President for USA Freedom Corps.

"We've given students the opportunity to visit Washington and go to places they wouldn't normally go and talk to people they don't ordinarily talk to," said program director Mary Anne Waikart. "I think they've learned that public servants are very accessible and very normal people who work very hard."

At the "official dinner," 17-year-old Ben Nelson of Fairbanks, Alaska got a catbird seat. "I sat to the immediate right of Madeleine Albright," he said. "I came here pondering a career in public service. Now, leaving, I know it is definitely the career path I would love to follow."

Members of the diverse class - from 13 states and two foreign countries - were recruited from top high schools around the country as well as through grassroots organizations like The National Council of La Raza, a leading Hispanic advocacy and community development group.

All have records of strong academic achievement and community service in their hometowns. They come from different racial, ethnic, geographic and economic backgrounds, reflecting the school's desire to assemble a "class that looked like America," said Waikart. More than half of the students attended the program on scholarship.

Nelson, who is active in Alaska 20/20, a multi-year effort to develop a vision for Alaska for the coming 20 years, and serves as his class president, said he plans to pass on what he has learned to his classmates. "I can get them to think about what they can do for our city, state, our nation. I can lead them toward a goal. Coming out of [the program] I can set more realistic goals for 20/20. I know what is reasonable and what is too idealistic."

For Cynthia Nguy, a first generation Chinese-American, life with her friends in the Boston suburb of Malden has always seemed pretty good. The 17-year-old, who works with local anti-hunger and children's programs, said she felt out of touch with national and international issues. "I've always felt that I've been sort of unaware of the issues we face in our country and our world that are so important. I felt I needed to do something to help, but I had no idea of what I could do. Meeting the speakers and seeing how devoted they are has changed me. I know [public service] is what I want to do as well."

Nguy said once back home she too will try her best to enlighten her friends. "My school environment is so unaware of what is going on. Our schedules are so busy we don't watch the news or keep up on current events. I will encourage my friends to be involved in what's going on around the world and make them see that their participation can really make a difference."

Mark Stevens said the experience has changed how he views the inner workings of the halls of Congress. "It has changed my outlook. I see the protocol in which it works. Democrats and Republicans don't always agree but they aren't always at each other's necks either. They are working for the common good of the American people."

One aspect of the program that has proven controversial is the use of a rigorous case-study method used by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Rather than simply peruse text books or listen to a lecture, students working within the case study method place themselves in the role of decision-maker in a particular case study. They probe underlying issues, listen to others' arguments, compare alternatives, define their analysis and, finally, suggest courses of action.

Some educators questioned whether high school seniors could handle the college-level material, but Waikart said she never had any doubt. "Yes, it's a grueling schedule," said Waikart. But hard work or not, the students "have done beautifully."

"We set out to prove that young people in the U.S. are very committed to making change and serving their fellow citizens," Waikart said. "It's hard work. People here in Washington said, 'It's part of the game here; you're doing what we're doing.'"

Stevens said the curriculum is indeed extensive, but essential. "We have to look at issues from all sides. It prepares us for thinking about all issues."

The school outfitted each student with a laptop computer during the session, a introduction to the kind of internet networking Waikart hopes the students will continue once the program ends. "They are going to be in touch with each other for the rest of their lives and we will help facilitate that. We'll create a network of those in program and make sure they stay in touch with each other and with us as well as with the people they met and spoke with," she said.

Stevens said he is more certain than ever of his career goals to pursue political science. "This program shows that people are counting on you. I have more inner drive to do public service based on the people I have met here."

This kind of enthusiasm is exactly what Waikart wants to see.

"We sought out young people across the nation who have a passion to change the world, and to turn that into meaningful action in careers in public service. We want to facilitate their entry into whatever role they want in life," she said. "If these are the representatives of their generation, we are going to be in pretty good hands."

In the case of Nguy, who is interested in pursuing Spanish language and culture, and speaks fluent Chinese, the program seems to be working. "There is so much to learn and this is just a small step of what I am going to do in the future."

Story by Carol Hammond

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