

2019 Students Inside Albany

By Jacob Miller, Horace Greeley High School

I recently returned from the four day Students Inside Albany Conference, and I am so excited to share the details of what was such an amazing experience.

On Sunday I arrived at Penn Station and very quickly met up with several other of the students attending the conference. We all sat near each other on the train, sharing stories about how we learned about the conference and what we were excited for. My new friend Alissa and I walked through the other cars and asked any high school students if they were part of the SIA Conference as well. We were generally correct, although we were certainly met with a few blank stares of confusion, to which we politely responded “nevermind” and embarrassingly walked away (but at least we were together).

After arriving, we met up in the conference room of the hotel with all of the rest of the students who had taken the train from Penn Station and all of the students that drove (the train coming from Buffalo was four and a half hours late, so we didn’t get to see them until much later that night). We played a nice game of “get to know you” bingo, where they made a bingo board using some of the facts about ourselves from our rooming questionnaire and tasked us with finding one person to fit each of the boxes. It worked really well, as within the first hour I got to speak to nearly everyone that was there. We ended this at around 6:00, and were treated to a delicious buffet Italian meal, with, of course, an ice cream sundae bar for dessert. Nothing brings people together like a good old-fashioned Italian meal.

After we ate, Laura Bierman, the director of the conference, talked to us for a few minutes about what we should expect, and ran through the schedule. Coming into the conference, I had expected, and frankly was looking forward to the fact that most of the activities that we would partake in would be interactive, yet the schedule looked to be predominantly made up of speakers. My fears were instantly eased, however, when our first speaker arrived that night. A former employee of the League of Women Voters, she came to introduce us to how New York State government works, which was extremely helpful as I realized I knew absolutely nothing about how our state government operated. Prior to this, we were given a quiz to see how much we knew about state government, and to be honest, I’d be surprised if I got more than five of the 25 questions correct. The speaker was extremely informative and taught me so much that I didn’t know, but the best part was that she was extremely entertaining, opening her presentation with a comparison of our state government to Game of Thrones, humorously pointing out that both are made of “drama, corruption, sex, and money”. I’m really grateful that she came to speak, because she allowed me to get into the mindset needed to enjoy the conference. Plus she, like all of our future speakers, based a significant portion of her presentation on our questions, so we had ample opportunity to provide our own input.

For the rest of the night, we hung out in the conference room, playing board games and debating with the Long Islanders over whether Westchester is considered up-state New York (it's not I swear!). We went back to our rooms at 10:30, ready to rest up for the big day ahead of us.

On Monday, we all met in the lobby at 8:30 and headed up to the Capitol for a tour of the building. It was huge, and had a ton of interesting stories to it, with its beautiful "million dollar staircase" (which would cost about 28 million to make today), the secret devil engraving that wasn't discovered until 20 years after the building's construction, and the numerous missing carvings in the Senate (after over 30 years of construction they said enough was enough and stopped). After the tour, we headed back to the hotel where we all met with Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy to learn about what it means to be a successful lobbyist, which was extremely beneficial as I knew very little about what it was like to be a lobbyist in general. We then ate a great Mexican themed lunch with chocolate cupcakes (we quickly learned that dessert would be provided at every meal), and headed off to stop at the Court of Appeals, which we learned is actually the highest court in New York State (even higher than the Supreme Court).

The next part of the conference was by far my favorite experience. We got the chance to shadow our assemblyman which, for me and two girls from John Jay High School, was our very own David Buchwald. After conversing with the staff for half an hour, we headed down to the assembly floor and met up with Assemblyman Buchwald himself. For the next two hours, the four of us engaged in great, candid conversations all about what it is like to be an assemblyman. He took us with him when he met with the White Plains fire chief and the New York Presbyterian Hospital (allowing us to see two actual lobbying examples), and he sat in the back of the Assembly with us during the entire session, casually standing and giving a thumbs up when he was in favor of a bill, and when not, giving the clerks a large thumbs down. What interested me was not only how casual the assembly floor was, with many of the assemblymen not even in their seats, but also how non-controversial the bills that were being passed were, with many of them being passed unanimously. We learned that because the Democrats have such a great supermajority in the Assembly, they generally know if their bills are going to have enough support before they reach the floor, so most of the debates occur in the committees or the party conferences instead of on the actual floor itself.

When seemingly everyone was voting in favor of all the bills (with the exception of the Republicans, who occasionally voted no, although the majority of the bills were very bipartisan), I asked Assemblyman Buchwald if there would ever be a time where he would vote against a bill that everyone else was in favor of. He responded affirmatively, stating that if they made it through five more bills (as he had the schedule of which bills would be put on the floor), we would get to see this in action. There was an addendum to past bill that was on the floor, but this addendum would only include New York City, and exclude Westchester and Long Island. Since all of his constituents are located in Westchester, he supported them by opposing this bill, even though every other Assemblyman voted in favor for. I admired the respect he showed for his constituency in holding their interests in such a high regard.

That night, we had another two speakers come who spoke to us about running for office. Laura told us that she could have gotten an assemblyman or assemblywoman to come speak to us, but thought it would be more effective for us to see more local examples, so we listened to a county legislator and a library trustee inform us about their experiences with running for office. None of them had any political experience before running, so it was definitely inspiring to see that it is possible to be elected to some form of public office even with no prior experience.

After that, as a way to get us out of the hotel, our chaperones took us to a Middle School basement, a place known as the “Pitt”, with ping pong tables, foosball, and air hockey. Although it seemed silly for a group of high schoolers to hang out in a middle school basement, it was a great opportunity for us to bond again, and a bunch of us got much closer that night.

Tuesday started off with two speakers, one from the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) and one from the environmental sector of the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), talking about the different ways that each of their groups lobby the New York State government. They were both very receptive and honest with questions, and since education and the environment are two issues that high schoolers tend to know a lot about (especially with such a diverse group coming from all over the state), we ended up having pretty great discussions and learning a lot from the presenters.

We had a little time to rest and eat before heading over to the the Capitol again for our shadow experience with our state senator. Surprisingly, I ran right into our own Town Supervisor, Robert Greenstein, on the way in. This day was when I learned how severe gerrymandering is, especially in New York. The two girls who I was with from John Jay live in Katonah and Lewisboro, respectively, and the one who lived in Lewisboro shared my state senator, Senator Peter Harckham, while the one who lived in Katonah was with Senator Shelly Mayer. Additionally, two other girls, one from Mahopac (a town much farther away than Katonah) and one from Croton-Harmon, were also with Peter Harckham. After wandering around the building with his staff for the first hour (even they got lost in the building, it was that big!), we went to the Senate floor to see a session in action. Most of the senators are expected to be in their seat during session, so we didn't have as many opportunities to speak with Senator Harckham, although he walked back to us a few times to fill us in on what was going on. It was definitely more difficult to follow what was happening, as there were no screens that showed us what bill was on the floor, but if you listened closely you could make sense of what was happening. Also, apparently Tuesdays are resolution days, which basically meant that a ton of different groups came to the balcony and were recognized by respective senators. This process took so long that they didn't start actually passing bills until 4:30, over an hour after the session had begun. After seeing the behind the scenes in Albany for two days, I can say I don't agree with the sentiment that nothing happens in the government, but if I were to have just watched that single Senate session I might have agreed!

That night was our last night altogether, so we got to go to a bowling alley (super cool!). We actually all had a lot of fun there, and even though I lost by just a single point, it was a great way to spend time with everyone.

The next morning we debriefed what we had seen, and almost everyone stood up and gave an interesting take away from the week, many of which I had never even considered myself. We also filled out the quiz that we had been given on the first night again, and I can confidently say that I probably got around 15-20 of the questions correct, so I clearly made some progress. Then, those of us who were eligible (not me, since I'm still 17) had the opportunity to register to vote, but we were given clear instructions of how to complete the process when we become of age. This was the end of the conference, and after receiving our recognition papers (who doesn't love a good participation award), we were sent off to the train station, taking with us a bagged lunch, half a week's worth of lifetime memories, and a renewed interest in local and state politics.

I would like to thank the League of Women Voters for giving me the opportunity to attend this conference. I learned that I have the ability to get myself involved with local government and make an impact in my community, and I'm eager to see where that takes me.