

People to People

By TK Coody

People to People programs provide international travel experiences for students, athletes and professional adults. This program was created in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower based upon the idea that people can change things that governments may not. I was selected to join the World Leadership Forum in Washington D.C. from March 3-9, 2008. My eligibility to attend this program started from a teacher nomination. Mrs. Balman was the teacher that nominated me to attend People to People. The application process consisted of my obtaining three teacher recommendations and filling out an application with personal information. After the numerous applications from around the globe were received, they chose the most qualified to attend the program. I was one of approximately 350 student ambassadors chosen to attend this World Leadership Forum. Given this opportunity, I was able to experience Washington D.C. for the first time.

To most people of the world, Washington D.C. is an icon representing life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is the capital of a country that people dream to be citizens of and heads of other countries model. To me, an 8th grade student from Sunset Middle School, it seemed to be just another metropolitan city, which claims the title of our nation's capital. Little did I know and realize how my perspective would change after only six days with my fellow People to People, student ambassadors. This city does represent the country of the free where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is achieved every day.

Initially when I was invited to the People to People student leadership forum, my first thoughts were boring and a lot of work. I had ten months to prepare my assignments and ready myself for this trip. All previous expectations went out the window and changed instantly when preparing to land at Dulles International. Already, I was getting a glimpse and a bird's eye view of the majestic buildings below and I wondered what the week had in store for me. I was not disappointed. Whether it was the Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam War Memorial or World War II Memorial, they all represented the strength, power and freedom that the United States stands for. Not only did I gain a stronger sense of pride but I also gained a great appreciation for the architecture and design of these great monuments. I was able to see up close, intricate designs, colors and textures of the materials used to represent our nation's history. The intricacy of the artwork and design on the inside and outside of the Capitol building was jaw dropping. Running my hand over the

columns and woodwork I could feel the complicated carvings and really appreciated the effort. The understanding and interpretation of what Washington D.C. stands for is evident every where you look in this great capital.

Another great aspect of D.C. was touring the many museums. I was really impressed with the amount of information and the way in which it was presented. The most impressive museum for me was the Newseum. I do not know which was more exciting, watching the evolution of reporting in 4D or being able to read 90 headlines from across the globe all at one time, it was an information overload. On the other hand, I was able to see the antenna from the top of the World Trade Center, the tower from Check Point Charley, and six panels from the Berlin Wall. Where else in this world would anyone be so lucky to see such important pieces of history displayed, and at the same time be so lucky to form my own opinion about the events. This city truly represents what the founding fathers had in mind for this great country.

Though not located in the capital, I was able to tour the towns of Jamestown and Williamsburg as well as the Gettysburg Battle Field. I was finally able to see for myself and visually experience what previously I had only read about in text books. These sites hold so much history for our country. There I was on the same grounds as my forefathers. Hearing the history, as it was presented at these locations made the stories so much more intriguing. I appreciated the sacrifices made to keep our country the land of the free. The reenactments performed on the streets of Williamsburg seemed very authentic to me; the actors made me feel like I was there, living in the moment. The authenticity of the Jamestown Fort with the interactive tasks helped me to better understand the hardships and rough times the colonists endured. I felt like starvation was eminent because food was scarce, or at any minute, the fort was going to be attacked by Indians.

Our tour guide presented us with an interesting riddle. He asked us how any one person could visit 193 countries in one day without buying a plane ticket? The answer was easy: the person was a mail carrier in D.C. who delivers to the 193 embassies of other countries! I find it amazing that our country allows 193 countries to have embassies on our U.S. soil—this 193 does not include Cuba and Iran. While I was not able to visit all of the countries, I was allowed to enter the Saudi Arabian embassy. My fellow People to People, student ambassadors and I attended an embassy dinner which was held just for us. We experienced very different styles of food and customs. This international experience made me realize how important government relationships are between nations and I also gained a stronger respect for all people who represent the United States on foreign soil.

My week as a People to People, student ambassador changed my perspective on this city and my country forever. This city is no longer just another metropolitan city that claims the title of our nation's capital. Washington D.C. is my nation's capital; I say with great honor that I am proud to be an 8th grade student from Sunset Middle School who lives in these United States of America. Washington D.C. deserves the respect of every American, and if any American has the opportunity to visit our nation's capital, take it all in!