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Students sample inner workings of state government

By VALERIE ABRAHAMS

Scarsdale High School juniors Katie Bowen and Daniel Karp joined 60 other teens from around New York in the state capital May 21 to May 24 for the Students Inside Albany conference, an educational program run by the League of Women Voters of New York State.

The Scarsdale chapter of the league selected and sponsored Bowen and Karp to see firsthand the machinations of state government in the Assembly and the Senate while shadowing their locally elected officials.

The goal of the program is to immerse students in the process by which public policy is proposed, enacted and changed in New York State and to educate them as to how they can influence and affect the process.

The two students from Scarsdale shadowed Democratic Assemblywoman Amy Paulin as she spoke with other Assembly members about the wording for a bill to raise the minimum age for getting married in New York from age 14 to age 17.

“[Paulin] wanted to make sure the language was very precise and specific so there would be no loopholes in the bill,” Bowen said.

Paulin also focused on a controversial bill about death with dignity. The students listened as she worked with others to modify the language for the bill, so death with dignity might be “available but limited in very specific ways,” Bowen said, and “accessible to the people who needed it, but not too accessible so it might be abused.”

Karp said he appreciated seeing how Paulin worked.

“She was great; she was always trying to lean on or talk to other people about the bills she was trying to pass,” he said. “Too many others were laidback.”

The four-day training program opened Sunday with an evening presentation about how the Assembly and Senate co-function with each other, along with some insight into the problems and corruption that have plagued Albany in recent years.

Then, on Monday morning, students began to see firsthand how citizens can effect change through the legislative process.

Bowen, Karp and Paulin listened to three nurses who supported a bill to increase credentialing for registered nurses — adding more educational requirements and qualifications so nurses would be more effective — and tried to convince Paulin to vote for the bill when it’s introduced in the Assembly.

The students also toured the capitol building, where they learned about the building’s history, architects and the significance of the Senate and Assembly chambers.

The second day in Albany, Karp shadowed Sen. Daniel Squadron, a Democratic member of the New York Senate for the 26th District, which includes Westchester County.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

SHS juniors Kaite Bowen and Daniel Karp with New York Assemblywoman Amy Paulin in the Assembly chambers in Albany.

Among many issues Squadron discussed on the floor of the Senate chamber was a bill written by Pace University student activists to ban the use of elephants in circuses and other performances throughout the state.

The Elephant Protection Act passed in the Senate May 23, then passed in the Assembly June 6.

“I thought they should discuss things of higher importance.”

— SHS STUDENT DANIEL KARP

However, Karp said he was surprised by the amount of curry favoring lawmakers did.

“When everyone meets in the chambers, they spend a long time talking about notable people or notable things that happened in their district,” Karp said. “It shows they care about their own town and their own event, but it took so much time, disproportionately to the legislative work ... I thought they should discuss things of higher importance.”

One representative, for example, extensively honored the Haitian community in his own district, Karp said.

“There was no bill or action related to it,” Karp said, and instead, it seemed like an “attempt to be political and get oneself re-elected.”

Once substantive discussions got underway, Assembly members explained whether they agreed or not on each bill

under consideration.

Karp said he noticed Assembly members pushed a button on a table to vote either in favor or against a bill. But the system was different in the Senate, where saying nothing indicated a lawmaker favored a bill. Karp said he figured a bill could pass more quickly in the Senate because there is less time spent on its discussion.

Though Karp said he’s not particularly interested in working in politics or government, he gained insight into how government works, what goes on behind the scenes and how lawmakers and constituents communicate with each other.

That is exactly the purpose of the program, according to the League of Women Voters. Through their education foundations, the state and local leagues offer programs like Students Inside Albany to provide students with the information, motivation and skills to become informed voters and engaged citizens.

“The league believes it is essential to educate the youth of our country so as to engage their informed and enthusiastic participation in the democratic process,” Joan Mazur, co-chairman of the Students Inside Albany Committee of the League of Women Voters of Scarsdale, said.

Bowen, who’s involved in the SHS Model U.N. program, said she has always been interested in history and public policy, but never had personal experience with local government.

“I’m so grateful to [the league] for allowing us to participate,” she said. “It was very impactful; it made me more aware of how to be a lobbyist and equipped me with knowledge of how I can make a difference.”