

## **The 2016 Students Inside Albany Conference**

By Chloe Suzman and Zoe Ewing

The Students Inside Albany conference was an eye-opening and meaningful experience that exposed us to the inner workings of our state political system and instilled in us a better understanding of how we can personally influence policy. For three days, we were joined by 60 other students from around the state, political experts, and volunteers for the League of Women Voters of New York State. Our experience at the conference consisted of lectures about various aspects of our political process, tours of state government institutions, shadowing legislators, and recreational activities with the other students.

A particularly unique aspect of the conference was the ability to meet students from around the state with a wide range of political views and socioeconomic backgrounds. The group was comprised of roughly 60 students hailing from everywhere from Buffalo to the Hamptons, and although the career aspirations of the students varied from biology to filmmaking, each student was interested in being politically engaged and aware of the legislative process. The conference organized group activities where we could interact and expose one another to a broader range of perspectives on Albany. On Monday, we were able to tour the Capitol building, a lavishly decorated stone structure whose construction cost more than the United States Capitol building. The next day, we toured the New York Court of Appeals—the highest court in the state—and learned about the state’s judicial system. More light-hearted group activities took place in the evenings. On Monday, we bowled in nearby Rensselaer, NY, and on Tuesday, we had dinner on a boat down the Hudson River and were introduced to historic and natural points of interest on the riverbanks. The chance to speak with students who had such a wide range of opinions, plans for the future, and geographic locations but were all interested in the democratic system was a prime example of the diversity in New York State and the necessity of including all voices in politics.

We had the privilege of listening to and engaging with experts from all levels of the legislative process through fascinating and informative lectures. On the first night, we met Barbara Bartoletti and Blair Horner. Barbara Bartoletti is the Legislative Director for the League of Women Voters of New York State (LWVNYS). Blair Horner is the Executive Director of the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG). Both LWVNYS and NYPIRG are political organizations that work to improve our government and empower citizens to take action in the political process. With extensive knowledge of the functioning of the government and decades of lobbying experience between them, Blair and Barbara were able to give us a comprehensive overview of the New York State Government and how New York citizens are able to influence it. They outlined everything from the branches of the government, to the legislative calendar, to the recent corruption scandals in Albany. The next morning, we listened to Barbara again, but this time she was joined by Senator George Latimer, a State Senator from Westchester. For this lecture, they focused more specifically on the lobbying process. They went through the “do’s and don’t’s” of lobbying and through simulations, they demonstrated the difference between a good lobbyist and “the lobbyist from hell.” Afterwards, we were able to try out lobbying ourselves. In small groups, we spoke to Barbara and Senator Lattimer as if they were legislators we were trying to lobby. We practiced using a variety of issues ranging from climate change education in public schools to holding paint companies accountable for product disposal. This hands-on activity was an enjoyable, exhilarating and highly effective way to expose us to the process of lobbying.

That evening, we listened to a lecture about the New York Constitution by Peter Galie, a Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Canisius College who has written myriad books on the subject of our state’s founding document. We studied the US

Constitution extensively in history class, but were unaware of the complexities of our state constitution. We learned that the New York Constitution contains a provision that allows the voters to decide to hold a new constitutional convention every twenty years. Our current constitution contains many outdated and irrelevant clauses, so the upcoming vote in 2017 for a new convention is especially important. At the end of the lecture, we discussed the ways in which social media could be used to inform New York millennials about the significance of our constitution and inspire them to become active participants in the constitution's development.

On Tuesday, we listened to two more lectures about lobbying, the first of which was by Blair Horner. We discussed the specific lobbying strategies that NYPIRG uses and learned about NYPIRG's student engagement on college campuses. Next we listened to Jasmine

Gripper, Legislative Coordinator and Statewide Education Advocate for The Alliance for Quality Education. She explained the issues that AQE fights for and the tactics that they use to achieve their goals. This lecture was especially fascinating because it dealt with issues of education that affect students like us every day. Other students shared stories of programs that have been cut in their schools as funding has dwindled. We were struck by the fact that Scarsdale High School is adding a Design Lab and a Learning Commons while other high schools in the state are slashing basic programs like orchestra and AP courses. We were highly impressed by the effective and innovative tactics used by both New York Public Interest Research Group and the Alliance for Quality Education. Both organizations have built strong coalitions, mobilized communities and formed relationships with legislators to advance their noble causes.

One of the most fast-paced and immersive experiences the conference provided was the chance we had to shadow two different legislators during a typical day in session. On Monday, we shadowed Assemblywoman Amy Paulin—Scarsdale's representative in the New York State Assembly. We were able to watch her negotiate with fellow members of the assembly, head to the Senate to push bills to Senators, follow up on various votes with colleagues, and push one of her bills through committee. Although Paulin is Chair of the Energy Committee, she also sits on the Health Committee as well as a few others, and we watched the Aid in Dying bill she sponsored be debated and eventually voted on. The debate was rigorous and approached the issues from a multitude of perspectives, and the issue was so controversial that committee members' votes crossed party lines. We also watched her file a Sex Trafficking bill to be amended and discuss a bill raising the marriage age in the state (which is currently 14 with parental consent). After each conversation with a colleague, Assemblywoman Paulin was sure to explain to us what the significance of the exchange had been and what her next course of action would be. On Tuesday, we shadowed Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins, the Democratic Minority Leader in the Senate. She is the first female party conference leader in the state, and Scarsdale is included in her constituency. We were able to watch the Democratic Conference meeting, where Democratic senators discussed the bills on the calendar for the day's Senate Session. We then sat in on a meeting between Senator Stewart-Cousins and advocates from the Multiple Sclerosis Society, who were advocating for a few bills which would make life easier for those living with MS, and the Senator offered her wholehearted support to the issue. We sat in on half an hour of a Senate session—other guests in the Senate that day were Jonathan Goldsmith, the actor who plays "The Most Interesting Man in the World" and Miss New York. We then sat in on another meeting between the senator and a group representing retired school administrators, and were able to speak with the advocates directly for several minutes. Both Senator Stewart-Cousins and

Assemblywoman Paulin were gracious hosts, dedicated legislators, and thoroughly invested in our learning experience.

The Students Inside Albany program was engaging, informative and rewarding. The knowledge we gained and the relationships we formed will serve us well into the future and we are so grateful that the League of Women Voters gave us this wonderful opportunity. Whether or not we ever choose to run for elected office, we know that participating in Students Inside Albany has helped us on our journey to becoming the active and informed citizens that we aspire to be.