



GA Launches Institute for Public Purpose

Lessons in citizenship and democracy
taught and experienced in Washington, DC

BY
KATHERINE
PUSHKAR

It says something about the Institute for Public Purpose (IPP) that when girls were asked what was their favorite part of the trip to Washington, DC, being excused from exams did not even get a mention. Instead, they cited little things like gaining a deeper understanding of entrenched poverty and the role that government can play in people's lives, having their world view inspired and informed by the notion of a life of public service and, closer to home, bonding with classmates and creating community.

There were 14 sophomores who made it into the inaugural IPP class, and as orchestrated by Upper School history teacher and IPP impresario Connie Blunden, they got to have the school trip of a lifetime: a week in DC, museum tours and workshops, and a tour of the Supreme Court.

The girls toured the Senate and met with staffers from New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's office. They had a session with Trevor Potter, former Federal Election Commission chair and founder of the Campaign Legal Center, a nonprofit focused on government ethics and campaign finance. They had dinner with civil rights and constitutional lawyer Sarah von der Lippe. And on that Supreme

Court tour? They managed to squeeze in a private chat with Justice/documentary film star Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

It was, in the words of Julia Sulkowski, one of the lucky 14, "an unforgettable week."

Classmate Yolanda Lewis calls it "an amazing experience." "I feel so lucky to have been a part of it," says Izzy Kalb.

A programmatic offshoot of Greenwich Academy's Center for Public Purpose, the IPP has as its mission to introduce participants to core concepts of government and public service. While the girls enjoyed a name-brand version of the former, their exposure to the latter during the second half of the week was arguably just as intense and even more rewarding.

"I think a lot of people would have assumed that our days touring the Senate and Congress and our meetings with politicians would have been the most educational," Julia says. "I learned just as much from our days



RUTH BADER GINSBURG

"What I remember most from her talk is Justice Ginsburg warning us all that remorse and regret can only lead to negativity, and the best thing we can do is to work toward the future and do what we can to follow our beliefs."

JULIA SULKOWSKI '20

volunteering and seeing the hidden, everyday parts of DC."

For three days, GA girls worked on the ground and in the weeds at a variety of different DC-area nonprofits that help alleviate homelessness and poverty. They sorted clothing and boxed lunches, they cleaned rooms and made beds, they served meals and then sat down and ate, right alongside their clients.

And underlying all that learning was a camaraderie and fellowship built on purpose, in every sense, that turned schoolmates into friends. "Honestly, I expected it to be a little awkward," recalls Yolanda, who didn't really know some of the other IPP-ers before the trip. "But it was the exact opposite, which made every moment feel comfortable," she says.

"Our group of 14 got so close," Julia agrees. "I'm so grateful for the friends that I spent time with that I had never crossed paths with at school." She notes how the group was able to learn from one another "while also having tons of fun hanging out in Union Station." As Lin-Manuel Miranda might say, fun is fun.

None of this, of course, is an accident.

On the micro level, Ms. Blunden and

co-chaperone Emily Dixon, a teaching fellow in the Engineering and Design Lab, brainstormed how to foster community and help the girls become a group. They all met for six weeks before the trip, starting in March. They watched educational videos and discussed reading assignments on public opinion, media literacy, the electoral process, electoral behavior, and voter turnout. In short, they prepped.

Once in DC, the itinerary was structured so that every day was led by a different team of student leaders who were responsible for the morning and evening discussion groups, for figuring out that day's travel, for making sure they got where they needed to go on time, using only public transportation—no cabs, no Uber. "By the end of the trip they had the route back to the Foggy Bottom stop near our hotel memorized," Ms. Dixon says. "I was amazed at how independent they were, and able to take care of each other within the group."

And you can be sure there was a macro level, too. Ms. Blunden explains that they had the idea for something like the IPP—a program that lets students explore citizenship and democracy both in the government and at the grassroots level, using DC as a classroom—years ago, when plans were just coming together for the Center for Public Purpose. "Our focus was on personal responsibility and participation," she explains. "We want the girls to be more analytical about how they see problems and solutions—DC is perfect for that."

"The lab concept is just as relevant and vital to the humanities as it is to the STEM arena," says Head of School Molly King. In fact, GA's success with rigorously intentional programs such as the Engineering and Design Lab, among other science-side initiatives, provides the model for IPP. "The





Inaugural IPP class along with chaperones Connie Blunden and Emily Dixon outside the United States Supreme Court before meeting Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

The IPP is really distinct and so aligned with GA’s mission and values. There’s a holistic, deliberate connection to service and leadership, civic and political engagement, and the itinerary reflects that.

template,” she explains, “is what we’ve done in STEM: We look at the national and global level to see the areas where women are underrepresented, and the political and civic arena is one of them.”

Make no mistake, this is big-picture stuff.

“When 17 percent of the representation in Congress is women, that is absolutely unacceptable,” she says. “We need to create paths so our girls know they belong and have a seat at every table, including the political leadership table,” she says, adding, “I have a tremendous sense of urgency.”

So the future for the IPP looks bright. In the near term, Ms. Blunden says, the girls are eager to keep the learning going, and some are making plans to meet for group news reads, while others are looking to volunteer on political campaigns at the state or local level.

Long-term, it’s even more luminous. “I am determined to take what I learned from the people I met and experiences I had and use them to be the active citizen we all hope to be,” says Julia. “I learned that being a citizen was not only showing up to vote, but making sure that I use the privilege and

SUPREME COURT

“It was extremely thought-provoking to first spend a few days in the Senate and the Supreme Court, learning about the various efforts that politicians are making to combat homelessness and other such issues on a broader scale, and then to volunteer at nonprofits working to end homelessness on an individual basis.”

IZZY KALB '20

gifts I have been given to help others in any way that I can.”

Yolanda, who hopes to be a lawyer, says that sitting in on the Supreme Court was transformative: “Honestly, everything froze for a moment because I was so very excited to just see what it actually looked like.”

Izzy says the trip “raised a lot of questions, such as what really is the best way to make a difference in such a huge issue as that of homelessness: direct service through nonprofits and other such organizations or bigger-picture policy work? This, and the many other questions that this trip raised for me, is a question I expect to be thinking about for the rest of my life.”

Ms. Blunden looks forward to the possibility of adding a second IPP trip to the GA school year if there’s interest (the smart money says yes). And Mrs. King expects the Group X trip to trickle down: “Connie and I have already had discussions about Group IX, with global history and the immigrant experience—whether it’s a program that’s DC-based or in a city that feels more accessible, such as Hartford.”

The IPP, and indeed this distinctly GA approach, will also, she suggests, trickle up. “Where are women most underrepresented?” she asks, pausing not at all to answer her own question. “STEM, Washington, Wall Street.” Check, check, and...?

Look out, Wall Street. You’re next. ■