

STUDENTS INSIDE ALBANY

A Tompkins County Teen's Inside View of the Capital District

By Sue Henninger

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Andrew Dunn, a senior at Charles O. Dickerson High School in Trumansburg, recently returned from *Students Inside Albany*, a four day conference at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Albany. Dunn was chosen to represent Tompkins County in the statewide forum, hosted each spring by the New York State League of Women Voters and funded by local Leagues.



Andrew Dunn recognized by Betsy Swan

In his application essay Dunn wrote that he was interested in attending SIA to get a more in-depth look at politics. Read on to see if he was able to achieve this!

Q. Albany has been in somewhat of a turmoil recently Was this evident to you students during your time in the Capital District?

A. Yes and no. With the budget it was definitely a busy time of year. When we sat in on the Assembly I noticed that the Republicans were trying to gain more influence and the Democrats were definitely not receptive to this because right now they have the majority vote. Also the Republicans were saying that the Democrats were making the budget behind closed doors and not including the Republicans in their decisions and that they should remember that bipartisanship means inclusion.

The day we visited the Senate was a Tuesday which I guess is usually a pretty quiet day. They do what's called a "Resolution Calendar"; for example one resolution was to make April 15th a "Safe Stop" day. They also commended a high school basketball team for their success and thanked a Common Council for hosting a benefit.

Q. As part of the SIA program you attended some lectures related to government and politics. What were your favorites?

A. I really liked the talk by Robert Freeman who is the Executive Director of the NYS Committee on Open Government. He was an interesting speaker and really knowledgeable. He advises people about how to use the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) which deals with citizen's rights to access to government records and the Open Meetings Law to their advantage to keep Boards (Town, School etc...) from holding meetings that should be public behind closed doors. He explained that "closed door" meetings can only legally occur at very specific times, which is not something everyone knows.

The Media Panel lecture was really good too. There were panel members from the Times Union newspaper, Newsday, a public access TV program, and a blogger. They talked about the effect of media on politics and the role of a journalist in the political scene.

They also told us about breaking stories, confidential sources, and the power that journalism still has.

The other thing that was interesting was when they talked about the influence that the Internet has and how it often doesn't have the journalistic integrity of newspapers because newspapers and reporters still check their sources and try to be as accurate as possible while blogs are often just someone's opinion.

Q. You also took a tour of the Capital. What did you see?

A. Our tour guide focused mostly on the history and the architecture of the Capital Building. We did see the Senate and Assembly Chambers and the "Million Dollar Staircase". It goes up multiple levels in the middle building and is made of this expensive red Scottish sandstone and has all of these intricate carvings on it.

Q. The League of Women Voters sponsors this conference each year. Did you know anything about the League beforehand and did your impressions change after the conference?

A. I didn't really know anything about the League except for what I heard from Ray (the student who went last year). What I learned about them at the conference was that they're non-partisan; they don't support any political parties. They do in-depth studies to decide what they stand for and then they lobby for lots of different causes. I think their positions seem to be sound ones.

The League was founded to help women get education and to have the right to vote. Today one of the things they're working on that I agree with is extending elected officials political terms so that politicians can focus on issues while they're in office not just on getting reelected.

Q. You also shadowed your county representatives-Senator George Winner (R) and Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton (D). What did you learn from them?

A. I liked both of them and thought they both knew a lot about their jobs and what was going on in the areas they cover. They each have staff members who help them read the local news to find things that might be of interest to them and I saw Lifton reading an article on hydrofracking which is a big deal in Tompkins County. I got to watch Senator Winner record a clip about some of his views for a local new station and Assemblywoman Lifton showed me around the “back rooms” of the chambers.

They’re both smart and good at their jobs. I think I would vote for both of them (Dunn recently turned 18).

Q. Were their jobs what you had expected?

A. The Senate was, Things were more formal there and they seemed more businesslike. The other students and I were all surprised about how laid back the Assembly members were. They were doing all sorts of other things like eating and talking about movies they were going to see while there was a debate going on down on the floor.

Q. How do you think your generation can change things in Albany?

A. Well, the most important thing I learned was that politicians are real people. Before the conference I had the idea in my head that they weren’t approachable and that things like writing letters wouldn’t make a difference to them one way or another. But now I see that politicians do meet with people and they do read the letters and emails they get and listen to phone calls. Politicians pay attention to local new and they seem to care about what people in their districts want. So we need to be willing to approach politicians so they can hear what we have to say,

Through the Media Panel, I realized that the Internet is more important than ever because this generation is more comfortable using technology. With media technology we can keep up with current news easily and be more informed from a variety of sources in a very short time. We just need to makes sure that the information we get is accurate. And, we really need to think about things critically and not just accept them as true.

Q. You’ll be heading off to college next fall. Will your intended major mesh with your interest in politics?

A. I think so. I never wanted to be a politician and I still don’t! I would like to have a research job studying the effects that the citizens have on politics through things like voter trends and the decision making process that people use when they’re deciding who to vote for. So I’d be on the outside evaluating and then I’d convey my results to the general public.

Q. How about your personal life and politics?

A. From this conference and from the AP Government classes that I've taken, I always knew that I'd be active in politics on a local level by voting and making sure my voice gets heard at meetings if there's something happening that I really care about.

Q. Would you encourage other students to apply for the *Students Inside Albany* program next year?

A. I would. Some of it was a slight review of the AP Government class that I'm in but the extra lectures and the shadowing made a big difference. The other people I met were excellent. My roommate was from Long Island and he's going to Cornell so I may see him again. There were lots of kids from the cities (NYC, Albany, and Rochester) and their view of Albany is really different from mine because of the wealth, the location, and the population density of their communities. And-everyone there liked to talk about politics which was great!

Sue Henninger (www.fingerlakeswriter.com) is a frequent contributor to family magazines. She and fellow Tompkins County League of Women Voters member, Kathleen Yen, co-chair both "Students Inside Albany" and the elementary school program, "Take Me to Vote!" Visit www.lwytompkins.org to learn more about either of these programs.