

Student Immersed in State Government

By Sue Henninger

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Charles O. Dickerson High School senior, Patrick LaBuff, has a lot of interests, including government and politics. After hearing about the League of Women Voters (LWV) Students Inside Albany program, he applied for the local League sponsorship and was selected from a number of highly qualified applicants to represent Tompkins County at this year's conference. Though he's still a teenager, LaBuff is a staff officer in the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, is certified as an Ice Water Rescue Technician, volunteers for the Trumansburg Fire Rescue and EMS Department, and lifeguards each summer for the New York State Parks. Along with this he plays sports, excels in school, and has an active social life.



Graduating this year, he plans to attend Onondaga Community College in the fall, majoring in Homeland Security and Disaster Management with the eventual goal of becoming a Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmer.

There are three components to the conference, lectures from professionals working in fields that impact the political process, a guided tour of the Capital, and the chance to shadow a New York State Assemblyperson and Senator. LaBuff enjoyed the tour and found Barbara Bartoletti, LWV Legislative Director, talks on redistricting, lobbying, and the steps interested people could take to work toward becoming a politician really impressive. "She was amazing! She really related to us, got our attention, and was able to explain really complicated concepts so they made sense," he says enthusiastically.

His favorite part of the conference was his shadowing experience. Before he arrived in Albany LaBuff made a conscious decision not to research either Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton or Senator Thomas O'Mara before meeting them. "I wanted my first impression to be of them as real people, not something that was pre-formed by what I'd read about them as politicians," he explains. Before SIA he had a vague idea of what their jobs were but, after getting to know them personally, he was pleased to discover that "they really do care and they're very assertive about things that are important to them." After watching both his legislators at work, LaBuff feels that the media is partially responsible for some of the negative impressions that the public has about what goes on in Albany. "The media only talks about gridlock," he observes. "What I heard was discussion and legitimate arguments." He adds that the politicians aren't only expressing their personal preferences about issues, they use specific, well-researched details and data to back up the points they're raising. Contrary to what he had heard, the politicians don't work alone, they have a whole team helping them collect pertinent information and check facts. LaBuff also found a lot of the debate occurring to be legitimate, rather than simply stalling tactics.

LaBuff had the opportunity to shadow a Democrat and a Republican. He describes O'Mara as a "great role model" and was impressed when the Senator took the time to come back and talk to him and the Schuylar County student that was also shadowing him about what was happening on the floor and what he, as their elected official, represents. "He wanted to make sure we understood the Senate process and to learn more about us, what we were interested in and what our views about the future were," says LaBuff.

Lifton also tried to make sure that her student shadow understood what was on her agenda for the day, including the Rent Control issue and a Women's Equality Pay Bill. "That one really surprised me," LaBuff admits. "I couldn't believe that women still aren't getting paid as much as men for comparable work after all of the different legislation that's been passed over the years." "I'd vote for both of them." LaBuff concludes. "They're good leaders."

Not only did LaBuff learn from adults at SIA, he also benefitted from meeting the thirty-five other students, some rural, some urban, at SIA. "They were all there to learn and it was a very intellectual group," he recalls. "My roommate's also involved in a national competition in Washington D.C. and he knew everything!" Prior to SIA, a FaceBook group was established for the students who LaBuff feels "melded very well" and they're all hoping to keep in touch beyond the conference. His new connections will benefit him in his future career aspirations he says because, "Now I'll have a friend in every city that's interested in politics!"

LaBuff is extremely appreciative of his LWV's sponsors. "They're great leaders as well and they did all they could to give us a really good experience that would encourage our generation to get more involved in government," he notes. In return, he's already given a presentation about SIA to his AP Government and Economics class and will be speaking at the upcoming TCLWV annual meeting in May.

After spending four days in Albany, how does LaBuff plan to make an impact on the political system? He says that he's registering to vote and that he'd eventually like to run for office, beginning with local government like his Town office or School Board. He's also been talking to other students about voting in the next election and to the adults that he volunteers with about some of the misperceptions people have about their elected officials. "They're skeptical, but I'm convincing them that it's not all negative in Albany," he says. He also hopes that politicians will make it a priority to educate students about what they do, perhaps through facilitating more programs like SIA. "Everyone can have an impact," he asserts. "There's so much potential for leadership in people my age that should be encouraged. We need to step up instead of saying we can't do it."

Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton (D-125th Assembly District) agrees. "It's really important for young people to understand that government matters and has an important role to play in our lives," she says. "I appreciate that the kids want to be in Albany and are thinking about careers in government."