

UNEP - 2016 Kristina's Report

Good evening everybody. My name is Kristina Johnson and last summer I had the opportunity to go on the Oddfellows and Rebekahs United Nations Pilgrimage for Youth. It was truly was a trip of a lifetime!

The adventure began when I met up with my fellow Albertan delegates at a hotel in Calgary before we went to the going away banquet in Langdon. At the banquet there were many excellent presentations made and we were presented with our coloured tee shirts which were a lovely shade of yellow, as well as bags that had snacks and games.

The next morning got off to a bit of a rough start when the wake up calls that were expected didn't come, but we managed to get to the airport on time to catch our flight to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, we got to meet up with the rest of the delegates on the trip. Every night we were assigned rooms with different people at every hotel so that we were able to meet most of the delegates. The next morning we toured Philadelphia and got to see sights such as the liberty bell and the place where the declaration of independence was signed. For lunch I had a Philly Cheese Steak that was almost bigger than I am and it was delicious. The Philadelphia Oddfellows lodge provided every delegate with notebooks and a pin and sent their most eccentric spokesperson named Pops to show us around. That afternoon, we got on our assigned colour buses and began the short bus ride to New York City.

The bus rides were always fun. We played games and napped to pass the time, and the best part was talking to people on the bus from other places. On the yellow bus, there were people from Norway, the Netherlands, and various states.

When we arrived in New York, we had dinner and were given a speech topic for the mandatory speeches that were to be held later in the week. The topic was what you could do in the next 15 years to help work towards the United Nations Global Goals. If you don't know what the global goals are, they are a set of 17 goals that combat issues such as poverty and attainable education. The UN hopes to achieve these goals by 2030 in order to attain sustainable development.

Afterwards, we went to the top of the empire state building. New York looks absolutely stunning at night. In the morning, we went to the United Nations headquarters and spent the morning touring the buildings. I got to see the general assembly, the Security Council room, and the social and economics rooms. I was very honoured to be there. The afternoon was spent at the 9/11 memorial and museums. I learned a lot about the events of 9/11 that I had not known before, and the effects of the displays were very sobering.

That evening we went to Guy's American Kitchen which has the best mac and cheese by the way, before we went to see a Broadway play. The play we saw was the Phantom of the Opera, and it was phenomenal!

The next morning, we went back to the UN for briefings, and sat in a room that the general public isn't allowed to be in. I'm not going to lie, but I felt pretty important. In the rooms, we were given 2 presentations. One was on humanity's impact on the environment and what we could do to reduce our footprint. The other was on the peacekeeping program and how to get involved. That evening we had speech preliminaries. We were split into 14 groups, and presented our speeches in hotel rooms. I was fortunate enough to have my speech chosen to go to finals. 14 finalists were chosen out of a group of 300 people. 5 of those 14 were from Alberta so we were pretty happy.

The next morning, we toured around New York City. We drove around central park, before going to the sea district. We spent a few hours there before going to Liberty Island and Ellis Island. The statue of liberty is very small in person, which was a bit surprising. Ellis Island was very interesting to me as I have family history there. It was fun to find my great grandfather's name on the wall of names with my friends. That night was speech finals. It was very nerve wracking having to present in front of so many people, but it was a great experience. The winner of finals was awarded a 1000 dollar scholarship, while the runner-up got 500. The runner-up was a girl from Alberta so we were all very happy!

This was our last night in New York, and in the morning, the group separated. Two groups went to Ottawa and two went to Washington DC. The yellow bus went to DC first, and we arrived in the afternoon. We got to explore the monuments in the 40 degree heat which was really great if you like the heat. When we were touring Washington monument, a few Alberta delegates decided that they wanted to go see the Lincoln monument in the half hour of free time we had. They ended up sprinting back to the bus in the 40 degree heat only to realize that the Lincoln monument was the next stop. They started the reputation of Alberta delegates always being late. We also got to see the White house, which was really cool. The next day, we toured the Smithsonian museums which were incredibly interesting, I'm a bit of a museum nerd so I was in heaven. After DC, we began the long bus journey to Ottawa. Along the way, we got to stop at Gettysburg, where we recreated a battle, and the Corning Glass Museum. In the museum, one kid played the sound of glass breaking and I'm sure you can imagine everyone's reaction. At one of the hotel stops, we went out exploring at night and found a Mexican fiesta while trying to find a park. The fiesta is one of my favourite memories from the trip.

When we arrived in Ottawa, we had some time to explore the Byward Market and introduce the Americans to Tim Hortons, beaver tails and plastic money. Then we took a tour of parliament. The tour guide took us through the House of Commons and the senate and explained how our government system worked. It was very interesting to see the reactions of the foreign delegates as they learned how our country worked. It was almost a new perspective. A trip to parliament isn't complete without going up the peace tower, and the view was breathtaking. The next morning, we got up to see the changing of the guard at Rideau Hall before jumping on the bus to see the changing of the guard at Parliament Hill. Unfortunately that was all of the time we had in Ottawa, and we got back on the bus to Philadelphia. On the way back, we stopped in Scranton, which is where The Office is based, and stayed the night in Syracuse where the Oddfellows lodge there provided us with a picnic. It was great being able to get out of the bus and play games after a long day. The next day, we arrived back in Philadelphia, where we were reunited with the other two buses. That night was very emotional as it was our last night together. We spent the night hanging out with friends, and decided to pull an all nighter as we had to be at the airport at 3 am. When 2 am rolled around, there were some very emotional goodbyes.

When we arrived back in Calgary we were greeted with the White Hat Committee. All of the Alberta delegates were made honorary Calgarians which was a great honour! Afterwards, some of us went out for lunch. You would think that after spending 24 hours a day with each other for 10 days that we would be sick of each other, but we tried as hard as we could to postpone the goodbyes.

This trip truly was the trip of a lifetime. I made so many amazing new friends and memories that will last forever. I talk to the friends that I made on that trip every day, and meet up with some of them regularly. Thank you so much to the Rebekahs and Oddfellows for providing this truly amazing trip, and for allowing me to be a part of it. I will cherish it for the rest of my life.

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