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No Longer a Reluctant Participant

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I was reluctant. I didn't really want to go to MACHE's Legislative Training Days. The day Mom asked me about it, I was against it. But she pointed out that it would be very beneficial since I was studying American government this year. It would fit in perfectly with my studies. She and Dad really wanted me to do it this year, if not in my senior year. I asked what I'd be doing and she told me it was basically a tour of the capitol and a detailed run down of the processes that go on every day. I was glad at least I didn't have to do anything up in front of people. Even though I still didn't really want to, I said I'd do it because Mom and Dad wanted me to, and God has commanded me to obey and honor my parents. So I determined I would go without complaining, mentally or verbally, to obey my Savior.

My dad and I left early Thursday morning for the State Office Building. At first, it started out as I expected: an encouraging word from Representative Mary Kiffmeyer, an outline of the day, and lots of information about how the House and Senate operate. Then came the excitement - the tour of the State Office Building. Just as we entered the second part of the building that we were going to see, the fire alarm went off. Oh, joy! I'd never heard one actually go off, so it was an exciting experience. People from all over the building began filing with us down the ten flights of marble steps and out into the freezing cold without a coat. For ten or fifteen minutes we waited for the "okay" to go back in. We never did find out what had set off the alarm. Arriving back in Room 500 South, forty of us regrouped (parents and students combined), took a head count, and separated once more to finish the tour.

In the early afternoon we were set free to visit committees of our choice to see how the process was done. Dad gave me the choice of where we'd go. To me there was no question of where I wanted to go: the Judicial and Public Safety Committee in the room just below the rotunda of the Capitol Building. We were supposed to return to Room 500 South in the State Office Building at 2:00 PM, but Dad and I became too intrigued watching our Senator, Warren Limmer, chair the committee and hear and pass three bills. We were so excited to see the last two bills pass. They concerned juveniles in possession of firearms and the auctioning of firearms confiscated by police. On our way back through the tunnel to the State Office Building, we met the rest of our group returning back to the House Chamber to see the House proceedings. So once again we turned back.

On returning to our room in the State Office Building later, we made preparations for the next day. Parts were handed out for our mock committee. Dad was chosen to be the police chief — a perfect fit. My plans of just going along, watching, and listening stopped there. John Tuma of MACHE asked for a few of the students and parents to volunteer to say a word of thanks to Senator Gen Olson when we presented her with a signed frame for her retirement on Friday. She has done so much to further our homeschooling freedoms and this was a meaningful token of our appreciation. I felt like I should say a few words, so I volunteered.

Friday morning we met in Room 107 of the Capitol Building. It was a committee room. Not long after we were all there, the forty of us of us tramped down to the Senate Chamber. Six of us had volunteered to say a few words and Senator Olson was very touched by our thanks and the frame that we all presented to her.

In the time remaining before lunch we heard from a few gals who had been homeschooled and were now working as legislative assistants and a senate researcher. Then we were briefed about the mock committee hearing and were given a bit of practice time. Before we broke to eat at the Ratskeller, Mr. Tuma asked for volunteers to be in the minority called the Greenback Party. He wanted about nine and there were several who wanted to, so I stayed in the majority known as the Bull Moose Party, which wanted to pass the bill. After being handed the papers with the bill's information, we headed out to lunch.

Reading the material while I ate my sandwich, I realized that I was in the wrong party. Even though it was just for practice and it had no real meaning, I wanted to be able to put my whole heart into acting out my part as a senator and I couldn't really do it if I didn't agree with it in real life. Well, I thought, it's too late now. Everything would have to be switched around.

After lunch each party was supposed to have a caucus and decide what they were going to do to get their vote. As I joined my

group, I told Mr. Tuma what I thought. To my surprise he said that they'd keep me in the majority party, but I could vote and debate however I wanted to because that does happen in real life. So I became the lone dissenter of the Bull Moose Party. It was a good lesson of standing on my own two feet for what I believe and not backing down because of what others want. For most of our caucus, Jack Donaldson, who was playing the author of the bill, and a few others who were my fellow senators tried to persuade me otherwise. It was a valiant effort, but I wasn't persuaded.

As we adjourned to begin the committee, we each had the opportunity to meet and introduce ourselves to Senator Sean Nienow who was to chair the committee. When I sat in my seat at the far end of the enormous table, Mr. Tuma came by and encouraged me to keep with what I believe and stand alone. The committee debate was a lot of fun. I wish we could've had more time. The Bull Moose Party managed to pass the bill without my vote. They made it just by one "yea."

After the bill's passing, we moved onto the House Floor to do a mock vote. Entering the chamber, Dad began looking for Representative Kurt Zellers' seat. "Daddy, Zellers is the Speaker of the House," I told him.

"Oh, yeah! You get to go up there, Mandy! He's your rep." My Dad pointed to the House Speaker's elevated podium.

"Are you sure?" I raised a quizzical eyebrow. I didn't think I wanted to be up front and center.

"Yeah. It's all right isn't it?" Dad double checked with Paul Hicks, the Assistant Supervisor of the Chief Clerk's office and our tour guide of the House Chamber.

"Sure," Mr. Hicks nodded. Hesitantly I mounted the few steps to Kurt Zellers' chair. He has quite the view from his seat.

After Mr. Hicks' engaging talk about the architecture and symbolism in the House Chamber, we began a miniature discussion of the bill again. With the help of Mr. Hicks and Gail Romanowski, I "opened the day's proceedings." It was tongue twisting to go from addressing my fellow students as Senator So-and-So to Representative So-and-So, and it definitely felt weird to be called "Madam Speaker."

Our discussion was short. We had already gone through everything and most of us had made our arguments. The bill was again put to the vote. I was shocked when Mr. Tuma and Mr. Hicks told me that the Speaker can stop the vote any time he wants to. Now not only did I have the power to choose who could be heard, but I could stop the vote when I had the numbers I wanted. Here I was, the dissenter of the majority party, and I could kill the bill! I couldn't get over the irony of it. Looking at the numbers on my desk, I waited carefully and stopped the vote with nineteen "yeas" and thirty-one "nays." It was exhilarating to read off the results and announce that the bill did not pass.

The thrill of the day's events clung to me as Dad and I drove home an hour later. All unexpectedly, I, the reluctant participant, had had one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. Seeing our government in action and participating in it should not intimidate us. Surely our freedom doesn't; and if we want to keep our freedom, we ought to actively guard it. MÂCHÉ's Legislative Training Days are a great way to experience how our government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" works.

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