

With a mix of trepidation and uncharacteristic anxiety, I walked off the plane into the Southwest Terminal. Looking around as I made my way towards the baggage claim, I noticed the overwhelming abundance of well-dressed men and women; each imbued with a sense of urgency, an innate aura of purpose exuded by their professional attire and high-paced walk. Attempting to build up a similar sense of confidence, I matched their pace and reinforced my sense of self with the blistering drum-beats of a punk rock song which flowed into my head through a pair of Beats earbuds. Back at my little university in Ohio, confidence seemed to come naturally; a sense of importance built over the previous years of collegiate involvement bolstered my ambitious daydreams. But here, I grasped for whatever hair of confidence I could find.

Washington, D.C. didn't seem so intimidating during the millions of times I'd imagined it in my head. A city like any other, save for it being the seat of our democracy. The object of my entire life plans up until this point, the single place I had dreamt the whole of my life around, now was right in front of me. To say it was a sobering experience catching a glimpse of some famous D.C. sights as I rode an Uber from the airport to my hotel, would be an understatement; it was all there. All those monuments to historical heroes, the overwhelming presence of government at work, the eerie yet expected silence in the Uber all worked to amplify the shrink ray firing upon my ego. Luckily for me though, my phone vibrated twice, a characteristic notification that my girlfriend of three years had sent me a text: 'You've made it, babe. I'm so proud of you!' And in that moment, as I peered back out the window towards the mixed blurs of people on sidewalks and looming buildings, I knew I was in the right place.

Arrival at the hotel was rather uneventful, just another lobby full of business people going about their matters with inherent urgency. Fast forward to later that night, and I finally get a chance to meet two of the other students attending the program: Riley Troyer from Fairbanks, Alaska and Laura Goodman from North Carolina. Together we comprised three fifths of the Society of Physics Students Congressional Visit Day, the event which had brought all of us to the capital in the first place. The three of us got dinner together and spent the remainder of the evening getting to know each other and commiserating over our passion for the intersection of physics and politics. During all this, I noticed an unexpected feeling coming over me: belonging. Typically, people I know are repelled by the idea of politics in general, and, if not that, then physics finishes the job. This blend of subjects does not necessarily lend itself to community building, but here I was, with two impressive individuals who shared my passions. I had grown accustomed to being the odd-man-out with regards to my academic fields of interest, so it was a deeply welcomed change of scene for me to finally be with my own kind, so to speak.

Flash forward to the next morning. We're up bright and early, getting ready to tackle a day of seminars and information pertaining to our mission whilst in D.C.: to educate Congressional staffers on and advocate for issues in physics. Before the seminars begin, Riley, myself, and another of our fellow physics students, Phoebe Sharp from Nashville, Tennessee, decide to spectate a budget appropriations meeting between the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the Department of Energy Secretary, Rick Perry. Riley, with his seemingly infinite connections, had caught wind that this hearing was going down in one of the Senate buildings, and thus we set out to see some government in action. The ensuing meeting

was almost surreal; we diligently watched as prominent political figures reciprocated niceties to one another to uphold a pretense of political cooperation, fought with their words to gain the upper hand, and subsequently defend their constituent's best interests. As a professor of mine typically liked to say, it was glorious. Moments passed, as I sat there in the hearing room, where the room and my surroundings faded away into the background, and my mind turned back to why I was in D.C. in the first place. What was it that I wanted to accomplish via a career in politics and physics? How did I really want to approach this subject? This was the beginning of a lingering fit of questions that would nag at me long after I left the capital.

Following the beauty that was watching Rick Perry get chewed out multiple times, we three physics majors made our way to the Optical Society of America's D.C. building. There we would meet up with both Laura and the final student on our trip, Elise Koskelo of New Mexico, as well as SPS professionals to undergo our training as physics advocates. We all became inundated with a variety of information, ranging from how Congress's budget process works, to the best strategies of persuading staffers to agree with your side of a specific issue. Everything was as I had hoped it would be, the learning, the practicing, the underlying worry that I might not know enough about a topic; all was as all should be. But then my phone vibrated once; not a text from the girlfriend. Could have been an email or something entirely unrelated. But it wasn't, it was from my mom back home in California. 'Sad news,' she said. 'Your grandmother passed away last night. She was surrounded by loved ones as it happened, sorry to put this on you now.' I had known she was in the hospital, but I wasn't aware of the severity of her illness. Funny how, at times, it seems like good things can only happen in one's life in exchange for something bad of equal value. Here I was accomplishing my dreams, while, at home, someone had had the last of theirs. This event spurred my mind to reevaluate those questions which popped up during the budget hearing that morning: How did I want to approach my life in government? Do I follow a science-policy route and become a lobbyist, or do I act upon my unspoken ambitions to become a politician? Where do I fit in in this world full of professionals and politicians?

The final day would yield an answer. We had descended upon capital hill once again, our eyes fixed upon the idea that we could enact some change in the government simply through the education of staffers. From office to office we strode, wielding our statistics and knowledge as weapons of truth aimed at an administration which had systematically subverted all that we cared about. And in each of those meetings, the thought nagged at me: on what side of the table do you want to be? The educator or the decision-maker? By the end of the day, the answer had become clear: despite my intense passion for science-policy, the belonging I felt with this specific group of physics students, I knew I wanted to be run for office. It took an entire trip to D.C. for me to understand this, for me to admit to myself that this was what I wanted, and I have the Society of Physics Students to thank for facilitating that.

Graduating from college is an intense moment in one's life. It is the culmination of your youthful education and the moment from which most people decide on their life's direction. For many individuals, they're torn between options, torn between lives they want to lead and lives they merely think they want to live. This event, along with others, solved that for me. It has opened my eyes in a way that wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't had this experience. In

experiment they say a result that contradicts your hypothesis is still valuable, even if it only dispels your original thought. In my case, the result that flew in the face of my hypothesis only lead me to greater truths.

And isn't that the goal of physics in the first place?