

Reflections on a First Visit to Washington, D.C.

On June 21, a group of seven students and four chaperons set out from Kotzebue, Alaska for Washington D.C. to meet with policymakers and politicians on issues that affect the Northwest Arctic. These meetings would be of historic significance, marking the first time youth from the region had traveled to D.C. as a group to advocate for themselves and their region. As one of these students myself, I can say with surety that this momentous opportunity has been incredibly beneficial to both myself and my fellow students. In teaching our generation to advocate for what they believe in, not only are the youth leaders of today benefitted, but also the adult innovators of tomorrow.

Our meetings began immediately on our first day in Washington, with our first two being at the Center for Native American Youth and the National Congress of American Indians. At CNAY and NCAI, we discussed issues that directly affect the Northwest Arctic, and discovered that many of those same issues also permeate Native America, such as alcohol abuse and language preservation. Our hope is that, through the combined efforts of local advocates and Washington based lobbyists, these issues may be addressed. Our third meeting, along with many later in the week, was with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, an organization tasked with developing offshore oil resources in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, and therefore with ensuring that this is done in a safe and efficient manner. In meeting with BOEM and informing them of our concerns relating to the development of our region, we hope to have aided and directed their planning for the Arctic. Our fourth meeting was with Senator Lisa Murkowski, and was primarily on the importance of developing renewable energy technology, and in doing so to decrease the cost of living in the Northwest Arctic, as well as increasing self-sufficiency in the region. Our final meeting was with Raina Thiele, Associate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs at the White House. An Alaskan native herself, Ms. Thiele is very sympathetic to the cause of native youth advocacy, as well as the protection of the traditional ways of life that are so critical to the people of the Northwest Arctic. Through meeting with all of these people and agencies, we hope to have informed the decisions that will need to be made in regards to the future of Arctic Alaska and its people.

This trip has also had a profound effect on both myself and my fellow students, many of whom had never traveled outside of Alaska before, let alone to the East Coast. The meetings themselves have also greatly affected our perception of the federal government, with Kaelyn Stalker of Kiana saying that “I believe the most important part of this trip was meeting with government agencies, and that those agencies heard and respected our voices.” In the Northwest Arctic, one of the *Inupiat Ilitqusiat*, or Inupiaq Values, is Respect for Elders; and while this is a value that needs to be upheld at all costs, it also has a tendency to eclipse the need for a youth voice in major decisions, many of which affect the youth more directly and longer than any other single demographic. For this reason, the fact that the opinions of the youth have been weighed as legitimate by officials in such high office has been incredibly meaningful to the youth of this group. In particular rising senior Jeremy Barr and rising junior Brianna Riley have expressed interest in being a Senate intern and Senate page, respectively. Mr. Barr in particular had never left the state before, and for him to express interest in a position that would take him thousands

of miles of home for quite a while shows the great impact that this trip has made on him as an individual. I believe that I am justified in saying that these facts are evidence of the value of this program, and of other programs similar to it.

To conclude, I think I speak for all parties when I say that this experience has been educational and beneficial both to the youth and to the agencies involved. The historic level of cooperation and exchange of ideas between rural Alaskan youth and government officials has been, in my opinion, incredibly productive, and is something to be sought after as often as possible. Where traditional knowledge and modern science can intersect and not conflict, but in fact cooperate, great strides may be taken towards the betterment of life for everyone involved. I personally have greatly appreciated this once in a lifetime opportunity to advocate for the people of the Northwest Arctic, and Alaska as a whole.

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