Going Global

Unlearning the Learning

SUSI for Student Leaders 2010

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TME changes everything. Only two months earlier, we were seven strangers sitting across a room, each with our own amalgamation of emotions on what to expect. Now, as the same seven strangers sit across the room, uncomfortable silence is replaced with stories, laughter, memories and a bond that surpassed expectations and left long lasting impressions. Such is the experience of a SUSI for Student Leaders’ programme participant, irrespective of nationality, race, religion or historical differences.

The Study of United States Institutes (SUSI) for Student Leaders is four-to-six week intensive academic programme whose purpose is to foster mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries around the world. The exchange programme is open to undergraduate students, and is facilitated by the U.S. Department of State and academic institutions across the United States. This year, the programme was funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), administered by Relief International-Schools Online (RI-SOL), and hosted by University of Virginia (UVA)’s Center for Politics. Under the theme “Global Perspectives on Democracy/New Media,” it was a comprehensive and unique insight into the U.S culture and politics in relevance to the remaining world, and most importantly an unforgettable experience.

The SUSI process begins with rigorous applications leading to careful selection. Each year, universities at a local level recommend well rounded students for the programme, who in turn have to fill out forms, write essays and eventually are interviewed. The seven finalists from Bangladesh this year were Ansar Uddin Anas (DU), Shibbir Khan (DU), Abdur Rahim (DU), Sarker Protick (Pathshala), Rezaur Rahman (Shahjalal University for Science and Technology), Mowmita Basak Mow (Asian University for Women) and I, representing Independent University Bangladesh (IUB). With much pre-departure prepping from the American Center, thus began our 5-week long journey into the media-pumped “land of dreams”.

First Impressions
On the morning of 29th May, we arrived in Washington DC to be welcomed by Ann Koontz, Technical Assistance Department Director at RI-SOL, and Kristin Smart, Education Exchange Coordinator at RI-SOL and our l’âme soeur for the coming weeks. After initial introductions and a round of Starbucks, we found ourselves travelling to the State Plaza Hotel in an unanticipated limousine bus. We were joined by 6 chirping Sri Lankans and 7 Indian senoritas, and now we were a group of 20. New to each other, we were a little hesitant but keen on knowing all the members.

The next couple of days were intense. While juggling between calling home, filling out pre-program surveys and trying to make new friends; we were taking in as much of DC as possible. Luckily, our arrival collided with Memorial Day and we witnessed the Rolling Thunder rally where hundreds of thousands of Harley Davidsons carried war veterans from all parts of the country (culminating in DC) to pay tribute to the abandoned American soldiers in Vietnam and show America that their services mattered.

On the third day of the program, we boarded a bus for Charlottesville, the place we would come to love and loathe over the next month. In two hours, we checked into our hotel, The Budget Inn, run by an Indian family who has long immigrated to America. After the initial unpacking, we were greeted by a wonderful and peppy Meg Heubeck and Daman Irby, both with the Center for Politics at UVA and our coordinator, mentor, host, friend and teacher for days to come.

Charlotte’s Diaries

Charlottesville is a quaint, quiet and picturesque city in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is centred around University of Virginia (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and home to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe (all former U.S. Presidents), as well as Dave Matthews Band. Having laid back, closely connected and academically associated communities gave us enough room to settle in our new ‘home’.

We jumped into lectures almost immediately. At 8 o’clock each morning, phones would start ringing with neighbours banging on doors, beckoning their new found friend(s) to wake up. Some took the free bus ride, while some like me preferred to walk in order to wake up properly.

Lectures varied immensely. We had conversations on democracy, constitution, new media’s impact on freedom of speech, independence of press, minority issues and even existing racism and discrimination in the West. While Chief Atkins told us how Red Indians felt about their settlement with the ‘newly formed America’, Marc Johnson taught us how empathetic teamwork can be the secret ingredient to any successful venture. With Darius Nabours, we learnt to create blogs and use all forms of free online resources; and formed groups to make
our own intercultural virtual platform. Lessons went beyond the realms of four walls, and took us to Montpelier and Monticello, homes to James Madison and Thomas Jefferson respectively. On days, we would find ourselves being driven to locations beyond our academic sphere, and soon frolic in the white sands and blue waters of Virginia Beach or hike to Mint Valleys Spring Park. Our friendships grew deeper, not only within the group of twenty year olds, but with people who surrounded us. We became more accustomed to the post midnight walks.

We even cooked South Asian cuisine at a farmhouse, and what a day that was! Not to mention our insatiable attraction towards Best Buy (uncompromising awesome when it comes to electronics) CVS and K-Mart. As part of our programme, we volunteered at a shelter for elderly citizens and a community organization, as well as interned with several local institutions (in pairs or groups).

On graduation day, a thunderstorm struck Charlottesville and plans got jeopardized. Guests cancelled, roads were blocked and when we came out in our sarees, suits and panjabis, we were informed about a slight change of plans. Instead of a fancy hall, we had our graduation on the grasses next to the soccer field beside our hotel and it was far memorable than any conventional dinner could have ever been. With our closest friends and trusted mentors, the ceremony became an emotional and special party, and a much needed parting memory.

**The Big Apple and White House**

Oh wait! Just when we thought we've seen it all, we found ourselves waving a tearful goodbye to Charlottesville and en voyage to New York City. What an unexpected transition! From spacious rooms in the middle of a quiet town, we were thrown into a classy hotel amidst the chaos of Times Square. Empires State Building, Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, Voice of America, NBC Studios, Channel 13, Billy Elliot on Broadway, Ground Zero. Our daylong trips, events and workshops were endless. Sure, we got bogged down with exhaustion, but the rickshaws between the limos or street artists never failed to surprise us! Suddenly, our lives were in the fast lane and we found ourselves racing with the big billboards that kept The Big Apple awake, 24X7.

Four days passed like a breeze, and soon we were boarding a bus for Washington DC, the final stop before we headed home. DC now seemed like the perfect balance between fast paced NYC and laid back C'Ville. However, it became more emotional. From Newseum the place to be if you're considering media of any form to watching Avatar on IMAX, every trip became longer and daunting as they neared the last day.

On our last dinner together, dressed in sarees and tux, it seemed like we've spent a lifetime together. As each of us headed round the table to collect their certificates from adorable Kristin, motherly Ann, exuberant Meg and storyteller Daman (who have evolved to being best friends), it seemed the longest walk ever. That night we stayed up late, reminiscing our moments together. Each day had a story to tell, something to laugh about and a moment that trickled a tear down our cheeks.

A month later, when I look back at each of those moments, I realise how this programme went beyond cultural exchange or learning new things or rediscovering the West. Every relationship made was special and for each participant, it was an opportunity to unlearn and relearn things about themselves more than anything else. We learnt not only to overcome hackneyed prejudices, both in context to East vs. West and subcontinental differences, but a unique understanding of what life had in store for us. The SUSI for Student Leaders program is truly life changing and none from the group of 20 will ever forget those instances of joy, pain, love, trust and unity.

*(The writer is a student at the Department of Media & Communication at Independent University in Bangladesh.)*

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