

Global Issues Network: A Student Ambassador's Perspective

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During the winter of 2007-2009, I found out that the Student Forum, a current events discussion group, was focusing on the environment in preparation for some sort of conference in the spring. Despite the little knowledge I had about the conference or what exactly they were focusing on, this immediately sparked my interest. Luckily, as a SAFE (Student Action For the Environment) leader, I was asked to join one meeting where the group wanted to discuss a potential focus for the presentation at the conference. After that meeting I was there to stay.

After a few discussions, we chose to do a presentation on how schools can lessen their impact on the environment—by using our own school as an example.

We talked about how to bring this topic to life, and decided to make a video to as a component of our presentation. As directors of the video, Ellie Onions and I decided to organize the scenes around a visit to our school by the cartoon character Captain Planet, through whose eyes we could explore the environmental projects on campus as well as expose various shortcomings in American School in Japan's treatment of the environment. This lighthearted and humorous approach enabled us to avoid a reprimanding tone, while motivating our audience to contribute to change. Following a successful presentation in Beijing, we presented to the ASIJ Board of Directors back in Japan, as well as to the 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, and the whole faculty.

As a result, ASIJ began the 2008-2009 school year with a variety of school-wide environmental initiatives. The school's fundraising effort was devoted to the purchase of solar panels, a goal that has already been reached. Another goal was to reduce ASIJ's annual energy consumption and garbage disposal by a minimum of 10%. The data from each month shows that on average, ASIJ's energy consumption has decreased by more than 10%.

This year the Student Forum club (renamed the Global Issues Network club) decided to prepare an update on the various successes of ASIJ's "green" movement. I worked alongside juniors Reza Bloomer and David Forster and fellow seniors Astrid Fulton and Ellie Onions for this project. We titled our presentation "No Heat, No Cool, No Problem!" as a result of our desire to focus on the importance of individual actions.

Eventually we travelled to the GIN conference in Bangkok along with Tim Carr and Rick Weinland, where we spent three days participating in workshops led by other international students as well as listening to inspirational keynote speakers including Jean-Francois Rischard, John D. Liu and Dr. Mechai Viravaidya. We presented our two topics: "Japanese Homelessness: An Issue Cloaked in Silence" and "No Heat, No Cool, No Problem," both of which were very well received.

As the conference came to an end, I sensed a wonderful enthusiasm within the ASIJ group as we shared our experiences. Many expressed astonishment in being exposed to such a vast variety of global issues that they had never thought about before. Others went right

into making new life plans, like Gavin Bird, who declared that he now wants to “work in an NGO or some service related job rather than some business.” A few of us began considering taking a gap year to pursue new interests after listening to keynote and workshop stories filled with creativity, risk taking and finding a passion. We all agreed that we wanted to transfer some of this energy and awareness to the ASIJ community, and decided to hold an assembly for the high school and present shortened versions of our two presentations as well as a few other issues addressed at the conference.

Last year, the conference was entitled “Earth’s Hope.” This year the title read, “We Can. We Will.” Though a bit skeptical at first, as I proceeded through the conference both last year and this year, I was given reason after reason to believe that such optimism translates into solid action that makes solid differences. “The conference last year was energizing and hopeful,” Tim Carr reflected, “but the theme this year was particularly powerful as a call to action.” And as we realized through this conference, such action doesn’t have to be all-encompassing; it’s all about finding a focus. As 18-year old Ryan Hreljac said in his keynote presentation, “It’s all about finding your puzzle-piece. Just find your passion.”

Once we returned from the conference, our “No Heat, No Cool, No Problem” video was posted on the ASIJ website. Third grade teachers Grant Rolls and Dan Stevens responded immediately by showing the video to their students, who also had something to say. The third graders wrote letters thanking Ellie and I for making the video, but another set of letters was directed to all HS students regarding the trash issue. “From watching the video, I have seen that lots of trash is left on the high school locker room tables,” one read. “When you can’t walk a couple of steps to throw something away it shows you’re not responsible,” another student wrote. “Please don’t make this a Wall-E world,” concluded another.

ASIJ still has a long way to go. However, with a variety of initiatives now in place, the new ideal of sustainability has clearly permeated the entire school, which will allow ASIJ to take a big step in reducing its impact on the environment. More importantly, students can take this new ideal with them and become the aware, responsible citizens that our environment needs. During the long hours I spent in the editing room or making powerpoints, I never imagined that our work would have such a big influence. The many keynote speakers at the both GIN conferences all told stories of the different ways they had inspired change; I am still amazed that we in the Student Forum now have a similar story, though on a smaller scale. In our story, optimism really did pay off—we began by thinking that we could. And we did.

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