

Dr. O'Donnell

Advanced Composition ENGL 3130

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## **Climbing the Capitol Hill: Meeting US Senators at Boys Nation 2019**

*I had the privilege of meeting Tennessee's United States Senators as part of a prestigious civics educational Program in Washington D.C. This is a story of my encounters with Senators Lamar Alexander and Marsha Blackburn.*

### **Introduction**

The American Legion Boys' State is one of America's most respected educational programs. The program is designed to educate rising high school seniors about the functions of local, county, and state governments. Held in the 48 contiguous states, Alaska, and Washington D.C. since 1935, participants learn the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizens by creating a simulated 51<sup>st</sup> state. Participants will run for election to various offices such as mayors, state legislators, the Governor, Supreme Court justices, and many more. The state will be operated by the students elected to positions. Boys State activities include legislative sessions, court proceedings, assemblies, and recreational programs.

Boys' Nation takes the State program to a new level. Two participants are chosen annually from each of the 50 Boys' State programs for a total of 100 delegates and flown to Washington D.C. in the month of July to become "Senators". As you might imagine, these Senators will simulate the functions and duties of the federal government. In addition to their educational work, these participants will attend lectures, visit historical landmarks throughout the city, and have a meeting with their real-life counterparts on Capitol Hill. If they are lucky, they may also have a chance to be addressed by the President or Vice President of the United States. The historic photo of young Bill Clinton shaking President John F. Kennedy's hand is actually a snapshot of when President Clinton was a Senator himself at Boys' Nation.

In 2019, I had the honor and the privilege of being selected to represent Tennessee at Boys' Nation. Through Boys' Nation, I made lifelong friendships and had the opportunity to meet amazing young men from across the country. Boys' Nation also gave me the opportunity to meet our U.S. Senators and get a peek at what the political world is like behind the scenes.

### **My Arrival**

I remember being so eager and so nervous as I gazed over the wing of the jet as it began to circle Reagan National Airport. Washington D.C. was just as breathtaking as I remembered it from the school fieldtrip I had taken there three years prior. Washington has a feel to it like no other city I've been to. It's as if the ghosts of every politician, soldier, and protestor roamed the city streets around you, and the impact of their historic moments left an energy that continues to resonate throughout the city.

I was thrilled to be back again. My first trip to the city had been brief, but that didn't stop the city from quickly becoming my favorite place. Now I was journeying back to Washington for "a week that would shape a lifetime" according to the Boys' Nation motto. I would be given the amazing opportunity to create relationships with the people who worked on Capitol Hill and I couldn't have been more excited.

### **Meeting Senator Lamar Alexander**

For what is known at Boys' Nation as "Capitol Hill Day", the American Legion scheduled the Boys' Nation delegates and our Girls' Nation counterparts for a meeting with our real-life counterparts on Capitol Hill. For my fellow Tennessee delegates and I, we had meetings with Tennessee Senators Lamar Alexander and Marsha Blackburn. I was slightly jealous of some of the other Boys' Nation delegates who had the opportunity to meet Presidential frontrunners such as Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Marco Rubio, and other prospective 2020 candidates at the time. To curb my jealousy, I reminded myself that no Senator is any more important than another, and it was still a big deal to meet any U.S. Senator.

A bus had taken us from the campus we stayed at, Marymount University in Alexandria Virginia, to a designated drop off in front of Capitol Hill at 8:00 am. Once all the delegates had been dropped off, the Boys' Nation counselors loaded back onto the bus and rode off. We were each given paper maps and a small card with the location of our meetings. They said we had to find our meetings on our own and to not be late. We didn't want to make the American Legion look bad.

Our first meeting was with Senator Alexander at 9:30 am in the Dirksen Senate Office Building across the street from the Capitol Hill. It was a good thing we arrived at Capitol Hill an hour and half before our first meeting because my fellow Boys' Nation delegate and Girls' Nation delegates were completely lost for a moment trying to find the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Much of the surrounding area at the time was completely covered in construction, so it was easy for buildings to get "lost" behind all the construction cones and scaffolding. I'm sure it's by design, but the Senate Office Buildings don't exactly stand out anyways. The entrance leading into the Dirksen Office Building was a single glass door with "Dirksen Senate Offices" written in small letters across the middle. It looked more like the entrance to a dental office rather than the office building of half of the United States Senators.

Inside the office building were several long hallways with doors positioned at what seemed like random intervals; although, I'm sure they aren't. Outside the door of each Senator's office stood the American Flag and the flag of the Senator's home state. It took us an hour, but we finally found Senator Alexander's office door by 9:00 am.

We knocked, and a blonde, female staffer who couldn't have been much older than 25 opened the door for us and welcomed us inside. The staffer took a seat behind a desk and told us to make ourselves comfortable on couches in the middle of the room while we waited for Senator Alexander. The walls were decorated with wallpaper to make it seem as if you were inside a cabin and hung up around the room were East Tennessee museum exhibits such like banjos, washboards, and walking sticks. Photos of East

Tennessee were framed along the walls as well. I had only been in Washington D.C. for a few days at this point, but seeing the exhibits and photos made me a little homesick.

Around 9:30 am, a door behind us swung open, and a different aid walked through. She was much older than the staffer that had let us in the office. I assume the first staffer wasn't much more than an intern, but this lady seemed like she'd been doing this a while. She took us into a conference room further into the Senator's office and began asking us a series of questions such as "Where are you from?" and "What College do you plan on attending?". She jotted down each answer onto a yellow notepad.

I assumed she was gathering notes for Senator Alexander to go over before he met us, but halfway through the Girls' Nation delegate's answer on why she wanted to attend Cornell, Senator Alexander walked through the door of the conference room. He said hello to each of us and began asking the same questions his staffer had just asked each of us. Instead of us providing the answer this time, it was the staffer that answered for us.

Senator Alexander looked tired. And I don't mean the "I need to take a nap tired". Well, he kind of did look like he could use a nap, but the man seemed genuinely exhausted, and I wasn't surprised. He had already announced his retirement at the end of his third term in 2 years. The Senator seemed ready to finally be done with his lifetime of civil service.

Once he had asked all his questions, Senator Alexander took us through yet another door which led deeper into his personal office. It was there he showed us a picture of his own time spent at Tennessee's Boys' State in 1957. Attached to the photo was a piece of legislation he and his fellow delegates passed while attending the program. The legislation was a bill to desegregate the program in the State of Tennessee, and their attempt was successful because it had been desegregated the following year.

We took photos with the Senator, and he hurried us out the door. I'm not sure if he had more meetings scheduled after ours, but it seemed we had overstayed our welcome. One of his staffers was kind enough to point us in the direction of Senator Blackburn's office, so we headed that way.

### **Meeting Senator Marsha Blackburn**

The moment we reached Senator Blackburn's office and began to knock on the door, it swung open. Senator Blackburn walked out and began walking down the hallway surrounded by aids and staffers. One of the staffers paused for a moment to ask us who we were. We explained we had a meeting with the Senator at 11:00 am, and the staffer looked at a younger aid and told her to take us and catch up with the Senator across the street at the Capitol Building. The staffer scurried into the elevator with Senator Blackburn and then disappeared behind the closing doors.

The young aid who we had been given responsibility to lead us to a separate elevator that brought us down to a tunnel running underneath the office building. The aid explained the tunnel was how most Congresspeople got to the Capitol building. Not only was it quicker than walking above ground, but my guess is it helps politicians avoid angry constituents.

On our walk through the tunnel, I saw my friend and fellow delegate Luke following the Wyoming Senator John Barasso. Senator Barasso was cutting up with Luke and seemed to really enjoy speaking with his delegates. I found out later that Senator Barasso was taking Luke and his fellow delegates to the National Defense Committee meeting. There, Luke met Senators Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Mitt Romney, and Mike Lee. Needless to say, I was jealous of Luke getting to meet four big name Senators in one meeting.

We reached Senator Blackburn as she was receiving a TV interview on her most recent legislation in committee. It has nothing to do with her politics, but I immediately knew I didn't care for Senator Blackburn. She wore an "I'm better than you" look upon her face and the way she dressed and behaved reeked of old southern money.

The first question she asked the four of us is where we planned on attending college. The Girls' Nation delegates told her their top choices were Cornell and Georgetown. Senator Blackburn told the girls they were making an excellent decision and proceeded to list how many interns she had recently hired

from both schools. My fellow Boys' Nation delegate, Amrit, told her the University of Tennessee, and she said "We love the Orange and White. It's a great school and you'll enjoy your time there."

When it was finally my turn to respond, and I said, "East Tennessee State University", her face curled into a scowl for a brief second before flashing back into her phony smile. "That's... okay." She said and turned her attention back to the girls.

Senator Blackburn then proceeded to ask us what legislation we had drafted for the week. The girls had drafted a healthcare bill designed to reduce the price of prescription drugs. Blackburn had no trouble going on and on about how she and her colleagues were working hard on the very issue. Amrit composed a bill creating a new branch of the military designed to combat cyber attacks. She found it very intriguing and related it to her most recent bill on social media security.

Because she dismissed my planned attendance at ETSU, I had no problem telling Senator Blackburn I drafted an amendment specifically to prevent Congress from turning their civil service into a career. "Oh," she responded and continued her conversation with the girls. It was obvious Senator Blackburn and I did not jive.

### **Summary**

I don't know where my expectations of public figures were before I had the opportunity to meet them, but my perception of public figures changed drastically after I met them. I think I perceived public figures by their image and what they put into the world through traditional media outlets and social media. It's easy to assume all politicians are the same, and party lines make them all seem as if they have the same personality because they all "believe" in the same ideas as one another.

I'm grateful Boys' Nation gave me the opportunity in 2019 to see through that, and discover public figures are real people with real personalities. Seeing that these are real people with real quirks and very real personalities beyond their image was an eye-opening experience. Regardless of whether I made

a real connection with the Senators I met, I'm grateful for the perspective I acquired because of the experience.

### **About The Author**

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