By LIAM H. CASCO

I didn't know what to think when presented with the offer to travel to DC to represent my Naples Council on World Affairs at the WACA 2023 National Conference. On the one hand, I was delighted to go to the nation's capital again, free of charge (always a plus), but I was overwhelmingly nervous about what I would even be doing there. As a freshman in college, I had never attended a networking event, let alone one across the country, and to be invited brought a host of new challenges to overcome.

I overcame them, however, as the application was a seamless and easy process. The form was simple to fill out, and Kaela responded to any questions I might have had. By the time my application was accepted, everything was moving smoothly, and Kaela diligently accommodated my preferences to maximize my experience on the journey.

By the time I landed in DC, the student scholars had already created communication networks and had known each other well in the weeks leading up to the conference. My experience checking into the Mayflower Hotel was simple and over in five minutes allowing a well-needed nap after a day of travel. The opening night for student scholars was an excellent idea (especially the unlimited pizza part). I can speak for all the scholars when I say that we all grew far closer that night than I had ever expected, and I'm grateful it was planned. For a conference with a lot of quietness and listening to speakers, all the activities designed solely around the student scholars were active, engaging, and fun!

Come Wednesday morning, the day was jampacked yet went by quickly. I want to thank our lovely "tour guide," Kaela, for letting us stop at the White House and take some quick photos, then leading us to the Elliott School. The school was a great visit. As someone with little to no opportunities in his home city for international engagement, it was great to hear about websites and resources for remote work!

It was fantastic at the Museum of American Diplomacy, but it felt tiny. I was expecting a more extensive museum (the kind DC is no stranger to), but I was still happy with the speaker and the artifacts it presented. The Washington Institute was a delightful visit, and I appreciated seeing the inner workings of a think tank.

Thursday was a long day. By the end of lunch, I was utterly "speakered out" and could not bring myself to sit through another speaker. As a college student, much of what I do is sitting in hourlong speeches and taking notes, so it was manageable, yet I found it less engaging than the previous day.

My trip to The Korea Economic Institute was a pleasure. I appreciated the young panel of speakers who were very engaging and receptive. The definite highlight of that day was a cocktail party extensively illuminated with the beauty of Mexican culture. By this point in the conference, everyone was unwinding, and it showed because I had some of my favorite networking experiences that night.

Though I may have overslept by Friday morning due to our extensive National Mall adventures the night prior, it was the most exciting day because we would escort the ambassadors to lunch. When I heard I would be meeting the Ambassador of Armenia, I was thrilled to have a personal tie to that state and the wider Caucasus region. Meeting Ambassador Makunts was a pleasure; she was very interested in what I was doing with my life. After extensive conversation, we parted ways but have communicated still through email, where it appears that Armenia may be looking into opening a consulate in my home city of Orlando. Thanks to this connection that WACA made for me, I may be working in the future at this consulate, something I'm incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to do!

In the end, I made lifelong friends across the country, both young and old, and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity that was given to me.

*Liam Casco was a member of the Gulf Coast High School team that won the Naples High School Academic WorldQuest competition in 2022 and flew to Washington to compete in national finals. He participated in NCWA’s Global Scholars/Columbus OH program and summer study at Georgetown University. He is now attending the University of Central Florida.*