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Governor's Institute of Vermont 2017

When I first arrived to the Governor's Institute I was uncomfortable; it was an unexplainable feeling. Perhaps it was present because I didn't know what to expect. However, as the international and Vermont students began arriving that night and the next, I began to feel at ease. I now believe that it was my mind calming me down to open itself to experience the love, friendship, and knowledge I was about to obtain from over 100 strangers.

The Governor's Institute on Current Issues and Youth Activism is a two-week program that engages students from all over the world to express, comprehend and accept different perspectives on vital issues surrounding us. The program is set in Brattleboro, Vermont. Some of the activities include swimming in rivers, strawberry-picking, ropes course climbing, hand drumming, barn dancing, live singing, and drive-in movies. However, the program mostly includes formal and academical activities such as various workshops, simulations, and issue classes. One important day at GICIYA is the Fourth of July. On the fourth, we all marched through downtown Brattleboro protesting for issues we are passionate about and of course protesting for what a democracy should look like.

A very memorable simulation was the mock congress that took place on the second day. During the mock congress, we took the role of congressmen and we heard from various "lobbyists" trying to convince us to pass bills that pertained to immigration, abortion, and climate change. The mock congress was very realistic. Not only did we learn about the process but the bills we passed or killed were "real-life" bills previously proposed to congress. Another simulation I really enjoyed was the United Nations simulation. More than twenty countries participated on tackling the climate change issue, specifically involving the Paris Agreement. I chose to represent China, seeing the huge part the

country plays in climate change, and proposed for a carbon tax to be imposed on corporations that pollute our air.

For six days, we attended a two-hour class facilitated by a college professor. I chose World Religion and Conflict. In this class, from Amer, I learned that we must accept and acknowledge each other's existence to maintain humanity. I learned that powerful forces exist and drive every possible concept. Such forces are neither good nor bad. However, when these forces are exerted in excess, they can often be interpreted as bad. For example, the force that drives loneliness, in excess, is enough to influence a human being to kill.

Forum theatre was Simon Norton's idea of implementing art into activism. We all had the chance to choose between collage making, singing, dancing, writing, photographing, street-art making, poetry composing, theater acting, etc. I chose writing which enabled me to open myself, and in doing so, I became appreciative. However, the absolute climax of forum theater was, of course, the performances. Ten groups used their changing-the-world energy to manifest activism in the form of art. The performances were given on the Vermonters' last day, which only alluded to the vulnerability and connectiveness of us all.

My absolute favorite part of GICIYA 2017 were all the people I now get to call my friends. American states that participated were Florida, Minnesota, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, and Vermont. Students came from other countries as well, such as Spain, Ireland, and Germany. A separate program hosted at the same time, had participants from Iraq. On the first day, I would have NEVER thought that on the last day I'd be saying "I love you" and "I'll miss you" and truly meaning it. It is an incredible experience having made stronger friendships in a two-week program than in a school that I've been attending for three years. Perhaps the reason for such real friendships is because this program, GICIYA, is REAL. This program is love, and acceptance, and

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openness and vulnerability. Applying to this program, I never once thought how much it would touch me, or how much it would make me realize. The Governor's Institute on Current Issues and Youth Activism made me realize that I want to inspire and touch others with my voice to fight for unity against national and international issues that each day separate us more from each other.