

My Summer with the Polish American Congress

by Jessica Hillyard, 2005

I can say with confidence that I have never learned so much as I have in the past two months I have spent in Washington D.C., interning with the Polish American Congress. I came here hoping to pass my time in a manner that would garner me at the least an impressive line on my resume and a letter of reference in the future, as well as a topic to develop in my upcoming senior honors thesis paper. I crossed my fingers that the experience would be an enjoyable one, for being away from home in a big, threatening city is enough of a challenge without the displeasure of despising one's job. And frankly, after having recently returned from a semester studying abroad in Spain, I thought I would not be able to top that experience any time soon.

Lo and behold, despite the most oppressive humidity the last eight weeks have confronted me with, I am glad to say this was the single drawback of my stay. Honestly, I feel that I have learned more this summer with the Polish American Congress than I have in any one class of my college career. About to enter my senior year, and having experienced other internships, nothing I have done has opened my eyes or expanded my mind like the assignments and duties I have completed with the Polish American Congress. The people I got to see in action, the events I was able to attend, the places I visited, the things I had the chance to hear—every second of my time has been one of learning and growing on my part. When I arrived, I was confident that I knew exactly what I wanted in a career and precisely where I wanted to go in life, just a bit unsure of how to jumpstart my plans. But now, I have a long list of ideas and possible paths I could take, and a solid idea of how I might go about each one. And while this newfound uncertainty may seem a challenge, I believe it to be a blessing because I have discovered that my knowledge and skills are not one-dimensional, as I once thought, and that my interests and motivations are many instead of a few. I have truly discovered myself in Washington D.C., better prepared to make a strong finish in my undergraduate studies and ready to begin my professional journey. Above all, I am more confident in myself and what I am capable of achieving than ever before.

In my time with the Polish American Congress, I have listened to distinguished intellectuals speak on a variety of today's most pressing issues, I have had the opportunity to participate in a assortment of unique activities, and I have had the pleasure of contributing to an organization which serves the Polish American community with pride. I feel that I have inherited that pride and have been accepted into a family, and although I arrived admittedly knowing little about the PAC and the Polish community, I was eager to learn more—and learn I did. I am now proud to say that I see myself as a part of this community because it is a part of me, and it always has been, whether I knew it or not. I was encouraged to continue seeking my roots, because a solid foundation not only helps you identify yourself, but also provides you with strength in unsure times.

Among the many highlights of my summer, some of my favorites included attending the "Is the EU in the Interest of the US?" conference, the Citizen's Flag Alliance's Walk the Hill week, and the U.S. Global Leadership Campaign's Washington Day conference. I learned a lot from the speakers at these conferences, and I feel lucky to have had the chance to attend these events through the Polish American Congress. I had the opportunity to hear such people as Tom Ridge, Robert Bork, Senator Rick Santorum, several members of the British House of the Lords and Members of the European Parliament, and many other well-known scholars and eminent political authorities, speak in person. I learned not only about how non-profit organizations operate, but also how lobbying works, and how the respective branches of government interact with outside groups. Seeing all of this in person in the capital of democracy as been truly unique, and to have done so with an organization which I could not be more proud to have served, has made my experience in Washington DC genuinely outstanding.