

PROGRAMS

Students weigh in on global water rights

By Margaret Combs

Two high school seniors, Anna Dysert and Phil Boisvert, from The Cambridge School of Weston (Massachusetts), traveled in November to Quebec City on a formidable mission. As the U.S. delegates to the World Youth Parliament for Water, they and 75 other students from 27 countries converged to accomplish something adults have yet to do: draft and approve a vision for global water management.

Thanks to the students' efforts, the world now has its first Fresh Water Act, a document that will be taken to the World Assembly of Water Wisdom in Kyoto in March 2003.

For both Dysert and Boisvert, working with teens from other nations and coming to a consensus about a global issue of such magnitude was a pivotal experience.

"This may very well have changed what I want to do with my life," said Dysert, whose vocal musical talent has always been her main focus, but who is now considering studying international relations.

"It was incredible to put our dream into a piece of paper and have world leaders put it

into a global proclamation," added Boisvert, who is expanding on what he learned at the World Youth Parliament into a senior research project.

The Act establishes clean, fresh water as a fundamental human right, and declares its management essential to the political stability of the world. Specifically, the Act calls for countries to enact legislation and implement water management policies, create systems of sustainable water resource management, ensure equitable distribution of fresh water, set up an oversight committee (similar to the United Nations) to negotiate conflicts and set up an international fund to assist water-deprived countries. If approved in Kyoto, the document will be disseminated to world governments for enactment.

Engaging students at a young age in the prudent management of the world's water supply is the expressed goal of The World Youth Parliament for Water, an initiative of the International Secretariat for Water sponsored by UNICEF and UNESCO. The premise is that today's teens will be the ones to inherit the crises of

water mismanagement and waste so it's imperative they are knowledgeable and involved. In addition, teens bring a youthful outlook and energy that may be exactly what is needed to cut through political agendas and get to consensus. According to Cambridge School of Weston science teacher Marilyn Del Donno, "Kids bring an idealism that most adults lack and they'll push harder because of it."

The Parliament delegates proved this to be true, putting in eight-hour days of debate and negotiation on 60 amendments and working in three different languages: English, French, and Spanish. Although it was arduous, the kids did not give up, said Del Donno, and at one point even lobbied the forum's authorities for more debate time before voting on the final version. Altogether, it was a maturing and eye-opening process.

"The students came away with an understanding of how difficult it is to write policy, how important the use of words, is and how difficult it is to work in different languages," said Del Donno, "It was quite an experience."

Dysert and Boisvert said they both felt well-prepared for the forum, particularly due to The Cambridge School's debate- and discussion-oriented classes, as well as the school's Town Meetings, where students follow Roberts Rules of Order and vote on amending



Students Phil Boisvert and Anna Dysert standing before the Parliament Building in Quebec City, where they helped write the world's first global Fresh Water Act.

school policies. Still, they were in for some surprises, particularly in discovering how the United States is viewed by the outside world.

"I learned a lot about our country — such as the fact that our country wastes a greater amount of water than any other county in the world — and I learned a lot about how others view us," said Boisvert, "They see our country as a very young child that does its own thing and doesn't pay attention to the big picture."

Boisvert has already decided to take a step toward change, starting with his own campus. This spring, he is staging an expo on water issues for The Cambridge School's entire student body, revealing current conditions and challenges for water management on six different continents.

Margie Combs is director of communications at The Cambridge School of Weston (Massachusetts).