Kilee Holmes represents Gateway at MassSTAR

Huntington - When Kilee Holmes arrived at school on Monday morning, it was clear that she had been changed by her weekend experience at MassSTAR, a statewide student citizenship conference. As she walked in to be interviewed, with a wide smile on her face, she was beyond enthusiastic to talk about her experience.

The MassSTAR citizenship conference is held at Lasell College in Newton, Massachusetts annually. Every school in the state is allowed to send only one delegate, who must be a sophomore. The conference is entirely run by volunteers and funded by donations, which opens it up to students of all financial situations.

The conference itself is a series of workshops, guest speakers, and activities that teach different leadership skills. Holmes described one of her days at the conference. “Each day begins with your facilitators, who are similar in role to camp counselors, running through the halls of Lasell cheering, singing, and knocking on doors to wake people up at 6:30 in the morning. Then, all the delegates ate breakfast together, which provided an opportunity to meet people from outside your “group” that spent most of its time together. This was followed by a group of “energizers” in DeWitt Hall, which is basically an auditorium. These energizers included a lot of call-and-response type songs, or other types of cheers that all 95 delegates participating together.”

Once the day was in motion, Holmes said they would do activities that related to the “points of the star.” She said that most of the conference centered around these five points: Respect, Responsibility, Collaboration, Initiative, and Intentionality. These points, when combined, make you the best citizen, leader, and person you can possibly be. After each activity, groups would meet back up with their facilitators for a “debrief,” when they could discuss how a given activity had impacted them.

One keynote speaker at the conference was Casey Pease, a 2015 graduate, who was the first delegate sent to the conference from Gateway. Since graduation, Casey began college at UMASS Amherst, majoring in Political Science, and in 2016 was the youngest paid staffer for the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.

Holmes said that before the conference she had been nervous and worried about it. However, she said that once she got there, she felt for the first time that she was able to be her genuine self. “Everyone fit in there,” she said. “Everyone went in hesitant, but came out of the weekend strong and passionate.”

When she returned from the conference, Homes looked back on her experience and said that the thing she had learned most was to be more aware, both of herself and others. “We have to be more aware of the cones we put on people,” a reference to a specific activity at MassSTAR, where people are judged based on randomly assigned ice cream cone pictures they are wearing. The activity is meant to demonstrate privilege, and just how clueless we can be to oppression when we’re not the ones experiencing it.
Holmes said that she also learned that every time you have an opportunity to talk, you should take it. She said it was really valuable to share her thoughts on things and truly be herself.

Kilee said that she made friends over the weekend and plans to stay in touch with them. One night, she even moved her mattress into her best friend’s room, rather than stay in her own room (her roommate was unable to attend at the last minute). In fact, when she handed me a photocopy of her “STAR Guide” to use for this article, I could see the phone numbers she had quickly jotted down to stay in touch.

It was clear that Kilee Holmes loved the experience, as every delegate does. She returned glowing, with a newfound determination. “I feel like I have to do something,” she said. Within minutes of coming home, she began to plan a fundraiser for a nonprofit she really values that she thinks does great work in our community.

Kilee clearly had spirit when she returned to school, and, when asked if she would return as staff next year, she said “definitely yes!”

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*Photo (left to right): Gateway sophomore Kilee Holmes with fellow MassSTAR delegate Francisco Oliviera from Rockland High School.*