

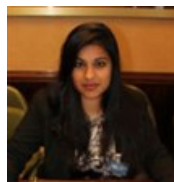


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## SPEAKING AT THE UN – A DISTANT DREAM BECOMES A POSSIBILITY

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By: **Neha Premjee**



When I was told that I could potentially have the opportunity to sit in a live session of the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, I thought it was some kind of joke. My surprised reaction to this news mirrored the way in which my face had widened upon first hearing about the Semester at Sea program.

I was getting ready to set sail on board the MV Explorer in August, as part of the Semester at Sea program. The ship would serve as a floating campus as five hundred plus other students and myself sailed through the Atlantic to fifteen countries.

To have the opportunity to sail to various parts of the world spanning a course from Europe to Africa to Latin America, while studying on board a ship, over an entire semester seemed difficult to believe. I had never heard of anything like it! My curiosity led me to look into what exactly this experience offered and I was pleasantly surprised to learn that students both studied on the ship and engaged in faculty led field trips, sightseeing, humanitarian and cultural and activities while on ports. It is a phenomenal, hands on experience in learning about the structural and social changes taking place in the world.

Upon learning about the opportunities, thanks to the support of the National Society of High School Scholars and hard work put in by Dr. Thurman in creating a plethora of opportunities for members, my distant dream became a reality. I've been sailing for over two months now, and the experiences and adventures I've had have been surreal. One of these opportunities came about through the United Nations visit.

A Semester at Sea alumna, Dr. Ariel King, ECOSOC representative at the United Nations and president of the Ariel Foundation volunteered to take a select group of youth into the UN to see its inner workings. Being an International Studies and Public Policy double major who was an active participant in Model UN through high school and passionate about foreign affairs, I was excited about this opportunity and promptly filled out the application.

Three weeks later, I received an email with the best news I'd received that month - I had been accepted, and should anticipate making a trip to the UN headquarters in Geneva while the ship was docked in Belgium. Additionally, I was one of three speakers selected to speak at a side event of the Human Rights Council. The Semester at Sea team had worked tirelessly to coordinate this trip, and it

was certainly worth it.

We flew to Geneva from Brussels the first day that the ship docked in port. I've been to Switzerland before, so its crisp air, pristine lakes, mountainous beauty and decadent chocolates weren't the attraction for me this time – it was the trip to the UN that I was eagerly anticipating. The butterflies began as soon as we landed in Geneva. Our little group excitedly made our way to the city center, put our things down and headed off to a wonderful dinner organized by the Semester at Sea Field Program office. We were eagerly awaiting what was in store for us the next day.



I woke up bright and early, got dressed and we headed to Palais des Nations, the global headquarters of the United Nations located at a slight height overlooking the picturesque lake Geneva. The Palace of Nations was built between 1929 and 1936 to serve as the headquarters of the League of Nations. We received our badges as we were accredited guests for the day, and Dr. King first escorted us to the 24th session of the Human Rights Council. The HRC was a large room with a beautiful 15,000 square foot hollow blue ceiling constructed by Miquel Barcelo, a world-renowned Spanish abstract artist. Barcelo stated that it is intended to resemble a grotto, featuring thousands of "stalactites" colored with more than 100 tons of paint with pigments from around the world.

That room held the most diversity I've seen in my life. Ambassadors, foreign policy leaders and NGO representatives from different ethnicities and backgrounds were all at the same place, on the same floor. As they took the floor discussing the respective issues of Syria and child marriage, the image in my mind that was once very distant suddenly felt real. We were given a thick stack of past resolutions and literature about the issues under discussion so that we could be better-informed observers; as we listened to them debate the concerns and voice their opinions.



After the stimulating session, we were given a tour of the United Nations. We saw the several buildings and organizations that compose this magnificent organization that drives economic, social, humanitarian and cultural development across the globe. We had lunch at the UN cafe, and proceeded onto our side event in the HRC. Dr. King put a group of youth leaders representing various causes to come together at this panel and express human rights issues that were of concern to us. Some of my peers spoke about women's rights, the drug cartels in Mexico, education and I made a speech on the issue of child sex trafficking. I believe this is a matter that doesn't receive the attention it deserves due to the discomfort of associating children being used as sex workers, but that doesn't change the fact that it is rampant across the world and governments, the media and NGOs need to work together to spread awareness and take preventive action. I was a potpourri of emotions as I stood up and made that speech: I was nervous, excited, exhilarated and humbled at the same time. It was amazing to have my views heard in the HRC, and a small part of me still can't believe that I had the opportunity to voice my opinions in the United Nations.

We spent that evening at the UN Beach Club and enjoyed a wonderful dinner organized by Dr. King. The next day our group went on a tour of the Red Cross Museum before bidding Geneva and the UN adieu to spend the day in Paris and arrive at our ship in France. We were all set sail to our next port of call – Dublin, Ireland. This trip has been a defining experience in so many ways: Observing foreign policy in action was beyond a dream come true as I learnt the inner workings of one of the most influential organizations in the world. Most importantly, it reinforced my role as an educated global

citizen emphasizing my belief that we all need to be more involved and do what ever little bit we can at our own level to collectively make our world a better place.

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