

## **“A Mighty Gift. This Club Can Work Miracles...”**

By Caitlin M. O’Neill, President 2010

I want to start with a recent experience. I had been asked to give a presentation on Invisible Children on the first Saturday in June this year. We (JVargas and I) made a PowerPoint for the presentation, but after fussing with the computer for a while, it froze, just as everyone filed in to see us present. We had to present extemporaneously. As I was doing so, I realized just how much I had grown in four years: I never could have presented off the cuff like that even three years ago! And I know there is only one reason I ever learned to speak comfortably in front of an audience: Model Congress. As a ninth grader, I was eager to try new things but pointedly withdrawn before older students or adults—this club has enabled me to become a confident person capable of fending for herself and presenting herself well before a group or another individual. These skills also proved valuable during my college interviews this winter. I have learned that what I have to share with those around me is worthwhile. I don’t consider it an exaggeration to say that Model Congress has been the single best all-around experience of my life thus far because it truly has been here for me during my years of greatest growth. I have been a delegate at 11 conferences over the years and they have all provided me with opportunities and experiences I couldn’t have gotten elsewhere.

This year in particular I have been able to advance as a debater at the PMoots and Harvard. I have won five awards this year alone—something I never would have predicted or believed possible last spring. I regret not finding my niche in Model Congress sooner—I’m sure you’ll agree with me when I say partners’ debate is my strong suit. I may be the only senior President to have attended all of the conferences over my four years (since we only went to SanFran once), and I can say with certainty that I feel most comfortable debating with a partner at my side. Presenting individual bills for debate never excited me much. Despite that, I also found several other modes of debate which I liked: Harvard’s larger committees where bills are made through compromise and large group work, and Harvard’s District Court. To speak of the former first, I think it is quite interesting that my first conference as a delegate was in one such 60 person House Committee and that I was terrified to speak at all! Yet, there I was again, a year later at Harvard SanFran in a room of 50, able to debate, bolster the speeches of my fellow delegates, and win a gavel. District Court was an entirely new endeavor for me this year—not as much like moot court as I’d first assumed. I acted in the capacity of an attorney and a witness, each for two trials, and acutely felt the stresses of both roles. I don’t think such group work is necessarily my forte because I was often holding my tongue when it wasn’t my turn to speak yet I wished to jump in. I didn’t enjoy the uncontrollable aspect of DCourt—not knowing if your teammates will make their points successfully and be prepared for whatever might come. The hardest night of the trip was without a doubt our midnight case—first because we received it so late; then because we had to work on it, both teams, on either side of the connecting door; and because it was scheduled to be presented early the next morning. CLiu and I stayed up for the majority of the night to ensure that we would actually wake up the next day, dozing for only about half an hour when everyone else zonked out. Presenting against our fellow BHS MC-ers was an odd experience; our team had taken BLevy as a seventh team member for the case, which effectively made it harder to ensure all were prepared because of the way the lawyers had to split their jobs up. It is always hard to compete against friends and have everyone feel so passionately about their side of the case (especially if everyone is sleep deprived) but I am pleased we were able to see each other debate and act as attorneys and witnesses. I think it is very different and beneficial to view people outside of their regular personas, as we were able to do. Following that day, I slept and slept and slept and still felt the lapse in sleep (the price to pay for winning awards perhaps?).

Anyway, I want to discuss some of the highlights, positives, annoyances, and other notable times I have had the ability to live this past year through Model Congress. I’ve already mentioned my sleep deprivation at Harvard this year, but I don’t think I’ve sufficiently covered the great pleasure I got out of being on such an intimate trip with the other seniors. It was a lovely way to spend the weekend and I thank you so much for allowing us the privilege of attending as I know the stress of having two conferences at once must have been high. My closest friendships have been cemented and tried by Model Congress over the years, and I truly think that through cramped hotel rooms, buses and plane rides, and debating opportunities I have found people I can always rely upon. Having friendships capable of weathering the ups and downs, the competition and partnership, is an invaluable gift for me. I cannot express how immensely such trials have impacted me, especially this past year. Nicole and I have become so close since last year’s moot court. In her I have found a reliable, intelligent, calm and measured friend able to balance my occasional bursts in reasoning or non-reasoning. She has definitely been my senior buddy throughout all our meetings, jobs, and decisions. Next, I know all of my Harvard teammates much better, have seen their strengths and weaknesses, and also, to be specific, experienced the captivating performance of Patricia Liu as a mesmerizing witness and a confidence-sharing roomy with Catherine Liu, Rachael Cassella and me. One of the best things Model Congress has taught me has been to forgo determining what an individual is capable of because the minute you decide, he or she will surprise you.

Aside from these great friendships, I have one more for which I owe an enormous gratitude to you specifically. When I contacted you last summer asking about an independent government class, you told me about Delaram Takyar, the junior planning some craziness about taking two independent APs in the areas I was interested in. From there, it all just sort of fell into place, with the two of you convincing me that taking AP US Gov't with AP Comparative Gov't couldn't be that much more work so "why not just take both and see what happens?" Well, the result has been an amazing friendship and two phenomenal Moot Court competitions! Thank you for pairing us together and bearing with all the anti-photo, hyper-excitement, crazy endeavors we have undertaken this year. (Hopefully our balancing acts will pay off with decent exam scores in July, fingers crossed!) I think it is fair to say that Delaram has always been a superb debater, but I think that she is now truly ready to take on the responsibilities of a leading senior. I know that I am relinquishing my participation in Model Congress to a group of competent, dependable, award-winning-and-potential-for-more members. Though that doesn't lessen the difficulty I feel in concluding my high school Model Congress experiences, it does allow me to do so without undue worry that you'll be searching for help next year.

Next I want to speak briefly about the Moot Courts I attended this year. The fall Moot was tough because of the sickness going around, but was a great chance for me to once again become attuned to the needs of a partner and learn to speak fluidly with another. Spring Moot was an experience unlike any other—I absolutely loved the fact that the competition was hard and challenging from the first round on! It did make us feel beat upon at times, but it also made the tourney so much more trying, interesting, and enjoyable! (Also note that I may be alone in saying all this but I really did feel myself benefit from the microscopic viewing window utilized by all the judges.) Having Kenny Alter FLOWN in especially to judge was incredibly intimidating. (And his obvious arrogance still nettles me but...!) That round marked the greatest and deepest thinking on morality and justice I embarked upon throughout the entire tourney—and probably for several months surrounding the tourney! It was what I would later consider a highlight but in the moment considered only a horribly unfair and terrible experience. It left me feeling inadequate and unable to reason—but also led me to feel like I had actually used my brain for twenty minutes and put some difficult questions to it. The conference hit home the mantra 'expect the unexpected' because I never expected such tough, astute, questioning judges and competitors. The level of competition at the spring Moot Court was intensely amazing and I am so grateful that my ultimate time as a delegate & debater was connected to such exceptional rivals and impressive rounds of debate. (I was oppositely stumped by the overall silence of the judges during the final round because they sent so few questions to either side. They tripped us all up a bit with that...)

I watched the movie "A Beautiful Mind" the other day and there is one line in particular which really struck me as important: "Conviction is a luxury of those on the sidelines." I have often felt conflicted by right and wrong—but Model Congress has taught me not to be content to sit on the sidelines of life despite the questions which come with action. I know that a lack of action often yields nothing but stagnation, and I have learned I would rather act and fumble than wonder about the maybes forever after. Conversely, Model Congress has taught me a bit about temperance when dealing with several different personalities and opinions. I think I've become rather well-rounded in my dealings with people and situations, determining the best course for each.

I have a great deal of respect for my fellow presidents because I think we each juggled immensely complicated and crammed full schedules this year. Yet we all seemed to also be able to devote time to Model Congress, often making it the week's priority to chair the meetings or critique an underclassman's bill or attend a conference as a chaperone. I didn't need to be the chair holding the gavel or making all the speeches, but I greatly enjoyed demonstrating proper rules and listening to members improve over time. I will miss being in a mentor-type position with the underclassmen because I think it benefited me as much as it ever might have benefited them. I tried to lead by being myself, quietly authoritative in meetings,—and through my debating example at Princeton Moot Court (especially for the freshmen attending). I might not have been the warmest or most enthusiastic mentor of us all, but I do hope that my example and my style of passing on knowledge positively impacted someone. I remember a feeling of awed respect for some of the accomplishments of the seniors when I was a ninth grader, and I hope I have provided an example to be likewise aspired towards, met, and maybe even exceeded by some worthy future President.

So what have I given MC you ask... Well, I have given my time, through many nights introducing the new freshmen members to the basics of debating, working with those going to conferences on bill writing, and then chairing the committees. I have given my smiles and love, for all the new members who made their first nervous speeches, for the returning members who misspoke during their speeches, for the silly and serious sides of each Model Congresser, for my fellow Senior Presidents, and for my growing friendships with underclassmen and talented juniors. I have given my voice

and my poise to debate and share my passion with the up-and-comings (having first gained those skills through MC). I have given my skills at photo collages and resizing pictures (regrettable weak compared with certain other presidents, but then again, having a variety of talents among us is also something quite important haha). I have given weekends filled with travel and picture taking and excitement. I have organized papers in envelopes (after a little coaching☺) and at times acted as the contact between you and the other presidents on meeting times. I have helped set up for and clean up from the Concert. I typed up & compiled the preliminary 'presidential tip sheet' for the underclassmen. I gave all my free time from the fall play to chaperone Yale MC, walking with sophomores to committees, sitting to tape full sessions, and applauding for the award winners at closing ceremonies. I attended the approval BOE meeting in October for the fall conferences and the dinner at La Luna in February to explain Model Congress and reinforce our appreciation for donations. I have given prestige through our trips to Princeton Moot Court, bringing home first place twice and second most recently. I spent Columbia MC as a chaperone, visiting committee rooms, again taping bits of full sessions, and corralling in Times Square. I gave time working with the freshmen on their moot court case, attempting to ready them for the tourney. I also gave my permission for my mom to chaperone several trips this year, the most crucial being Harvard MC, where all attending acted with the respect, restraint, and talent required to trust fourteen students on a trip without their primary advisor (thank you Petela!). I am leaving Model Congress one of my dearest friends, all trained up you might say to fill the shoes we will be leaving behind and—with the other future presidents—perhaps capable of surpassing us (but that remains to be seen haha). I have always tried to be available to help whenever necessary. However, all that I can say I have 'given' Model Congress pales before what Model Congress has provided me with.

To any and all underclassmen: I advise involvement. Become as involved in this club as possible because, if you allow it to suck you in, it will transform your life. I have become confident in myself and my talents through my experiences with **Model Congress and that is a mighty gift. This club can work miracles if** you devote yourself to its improvement and continuation. I challenge you to read the newspaper, inform yourself on world events, talk about substantial things with your friends, take a chance and stand for something, refuse to make drama where it isn't needed, keep your confidences, and step up to meet your own potential. Model Congress has meant friendships and happiness and struggles and excitement to me—and I know I am not alone in being so affected. Take advantage of the tremendous opportunities available through the patience, persistence, and perseverance of Petela. I caution future leaders to not fall victim to a feeling of entitlement or inflated greatness because it can mar and distort your ability to successfully impact underclassmen and share a wonderful experience with other MC members. Don't let your past record or limits define what you do today. If Petela gives you a shot at a conference or an officer ship, don't screw it up. You'll only find regrets that way. Where you start is not where you end: it all depends on your effort and commitment. Oh, and most importantly: **thank Petela for everything** you can remember because, without a doubt, you probably still don't remember or recognize everything he has done for you.

Petela: I want to thank you for my wonderful college recommendation—you have helped ensure my future schooling in a very concrete, important way. Thank you for agreeing to be the advisor for my government classes and for all the trust you have given me this past year especially. Thank you for documenting each step and conference of my high school years because those photos will allow me to reflect on these experiences years into the future as clearly as I can now. Model Congress, as I hope this reflection shows, will follow me into college and guide my future. Thank you for continuing to lead this program; it is singular in its level of inclusion, in the passion it can instill in its members, in the opportunities it affords and in the growth possible through it. I am not sure how you manage to take us to so many conferences each year without going insane—but I am infinitely indebted to you for continuing to do so because it has truly made my high school years as significant and special as they have been. I admire all the care and attention you take in planning our trips and I hope some of the recognition we are leaving as a legacy helps to justify and prove exactly how amazing Model Congress is and how much opportunity it provides its members. Thank you for listening to my opinions and for never revealing your own (☺☺☺!). Thank you for your patience and for the high standards you have held me to. Thank you for making me appreciate smile faces. I appreciate all the guidance, support, and humor you have shared with me throughout my high school career and promise I will keep in touch and most likely visit whenever possible!

---

**Caitlin attended 11 conferences, winning 8 Awards including 4 Gavels & two 1<sup>st</sup> place PMoot Court Tourney victories.** She has been one of our most dedicated and award winning members, ever ☺ She will be missed very very much ☺ Caitlin will be a Blue Devil attending Duke University next fall, most likely majoring in History, Anthropology, or Pre-Law.