

Could This Be the Start of Something Beautiful?

Wherein the author, Conor Reardon '04, learns a thing or two about Yale, grinding machines, and the physics of crutches.

At Branford High, the school day ends at 2:25. Hundreds of teenagers jostle their way to their lockers, and there is a hectic rush for binders and notebooks and backpacks. Each will go their separate ways, some boarding the bus, some heading to the locker rooms for after-school sports. And as they walk through the hallways or the locker bays or the cafeteria with the big giant "B" in the middle of the floor, they listen to the announcements.

The announcements. A voice magically crackles over the intercom, dictating the actions of a large proportion of the student body for the afternoon. And the one characteristic of these announcements that never ceases to amaze me is the sheer number of clubs in Branford High School.

At Branford, there is a club for every possible interest. Drama club. Poetry club. Young Republicans club. Young Democrats club. Asian Awareness, Cultural Diversity, Amnesty International, Mountain Biking club, Student Council. There is a story behind each one of these associations -- one person, or a small group of people, who possessed the interest and the initiative to grab hold of an idea and to encourage others to take up the call. One of these clubs, in fact, probably the most popular in school, and more of a program than club, is called the Model Congress.

I myself am a member of this association. It seems that, over a decade ago, some boy at Harvard University decided that area high school students would love to dress up in itchy clothing and pretend to be Congressmen. Amazingly, he was right. In the ten years since its inception, Model Congress has spread to countless schools in states all over the eastern and even western seaboard. The organization, hereafter to be referred to as MC, consists of different groups in various schools. Membership in this group entitles one to be considered for selection to attend an actual MC.

The average MC involves perhaps thirty to fifty high schools. Each school sends anywhere from five to fifty students (or in Branford's case seventy five this year at Yale!) in their delegation, so there is quite a large number of people in attendance. The actual Congress takes place at a college (usually Ivy League) or other institution of higher learning. Delegates to the MC are broken into two groups: Senators and Representatives. These groups are subdivided into committees, which deal with various facets of government. Each student authors a bill that relates to his or her committee, and must propose it before the rest of the group. The Senator or Representative argues that the bill should be made law; the rest of his committee debates on the matter, and eventually votes on it. If the bill passes committee, it goes on to a full House or full Senate session, where it is debated before perhaps 200 delegates. If one's bill passes the full session, then he or she has attained the exalted rank of Really Good.

I'm sorry that you had to be bored to death with the preceding details, but they were a necessary measure to ensure your comprehension of the events that shall be presently depicted.

In the month of September during my freshman year, a friend of mine told me about Model Congress. It did not seem like something I would enjoy, and I had no desire to make an ass of myself in front of such a large volume of people; however, Mom decided that it would look good on a college application, so I ended up inquiring further about the club.

The things I heard made it seem less and less appealing. "Oh yeah!" said the club veterans, "It's great! If you get *really* lucky, you get to debate your bill before hundreds of other delegates who want nothing more than to blow you out of the sky like a slow-moving pheasant!" It sounded like a nightmare—something akin to coming to school or the workplace with no pants on. And that was if I got really lucky. Say I didn't—or worse, I got unlucky, which must happen to a certain number of unfortunate souls each year. I tried to find some, but couldn't succeed. Apparently, the experience either killed them or put them in an asylum. I had no doubt that Model Congress Road would lead to either my untimely demise or a lifetime spent in a straitjacket.

Nevertheless, Mom and college won out. I answered a series of admissions questions that would determine my ability to look like a jackass in front of a large collection of my peers. The head leader guy—Petela—must have thought I'd be very good at that, and I was admitted to the club and chosen to attend the Yale MC. Petela is one of the few people in the world to be universally known by only one name, like Madonna or Jesus. His main defining characteristic is that he has a video camcorder stuck to his right palm. I have never seen the man without a camera in his hand or around his neck; I would bet confidently that he sleeps with it there. He has a habit of popping into meetings (or actual MC sessions) at very inopportune times, such as when I am A) saying something stupid and looking like an idiot, or B) sleeping. He then proceeds to film my every move for several minutes, like a Discovery Channel photographer documenting a herd of wildebeest. The whole process can be very unnerving.

By about mid-October, the Model Congress goings-on were starting with a vengeance. Meetings were held at least twice a week at night; during these gatherings, the senior members of the club did their best to impart their knowledge upon those less fortunate than themselves. Ten or fifteen of us would gather in a room, and the chair (head person, usually a senior president), would introduce a bill. I would sit there as the other students stood and debated it, trying not to be noticed. Occasionally, I would be seen, and the chair would say these dreaded words: "Senator Reardon, you are now recognized for two minutes." By the third or fourth time this was said to me, I realized that it meant I was supposed to speak. Of course, having been only marginally paying attention to the preceding events, I usually had little or no idea what the bill entailed. I would stand up, try to read the entire bill in ten seconds or less, mumble incoherently -- usually something like "mumbowumboschglegergygoop"-- and sit back down. If I was lucky, the chair would simply look confused, as if I had stood and said, "I came, I saw, I conquered. Supercalifragilisticexpyaladosious. Thank you, and good night." If I didn't get lucky, I would get a dirty look, an exasperated sigh, and snickers from the surrounding debaters.

Not surprisingly, six or eight meetings of this sort were not *quite* sufficient to prepare me for the real thing. Nevertheless, MC opening night arrived. Branford High School delegates, dressed to the nines in suits and ties, congregated at the school and boarded a bus for New Haven. All except me, that is. I succeeded in missing the bus by a good twenty minutes. Not a major problem, I thought. Mom agreed; it was easy enough to meet the rest of them at the pre-conference dinner at Modern Pizza.

We arrived at Modern perhaps twenty-five minutes later. Thank God, I thought. But wait. Where the hell was everyone? Certainly not here; I didn't recognize one face. Answer: At *Naples Pizza*. This was confirmed by a frantic cell phone call to Petela.

I arrived at Naples about a half hour after everyone else. Of course, the food was basically gone, and everybody was packing up to go. Great start to the MC career.

From here, the bus traveled to the Omni Hotel. This was the site of opening ceremonies. I forget most of what occurred during this time; all, that is, except for the speech by a Real Live Congressman.

These speeches are apparently very common at such MC gatherings. This is because the main focus of an MC is emulating Congressmen in every way possible. Therefore, listening to one lecture is comparable to having Frank Perdue speak at a chicken farmer convention. The particular celebrity present at Yale was some lady Representative from Connecticut.

This woman made a speech that lasted at least forty-five minutes. This was a bit excessive, especially because she said some very idiotic things. She spoke mainly about the election problems of 2001. Due to the fact that the state of Florida conducts a presidential election in the same manner we chose Class Representative in fourth grade, it took about two months to do something that usually takes closer to a day. It was the most astounding example of federal incompetence in the history of our country, with the possible exception of the Bay of Pigs invasion. However, the featured Congressman felt compelled to tell all of us that the present system was infallible, that removing the Electoral College would turn us all into dirty Communists, and that anyone who thought differently suffered from an intellectual deficiency. After spending several moments mulling over how much I hated this woman, I went to sleep.

I awoke a while later. The lady was still talking. This thoroughly astounded me, because I felt like I had been asleep for hours. She was presently speaking very passionately about the New Jersey gubernatorial election. She made the comment that the election had been “bought,” referring to the winner as something along the lines of a no-good Fascist -- Big, *Big* Mistake.

The speaker had neglected to notice that many of the delegates -- and the teachers who accompanied them -- were from out-of-state. Of these, a fair percentage were from, where else, New Jersey. And most of the adults had voted for the “no-good Fascist.”

One could see the fireworks coming before they actually began. A black-haired man wearing a Princeton shirt raised his hand. The Representative acknowledged him. He rose and said, “I am a resident of New Jersey. I voted for Governor [no-good Fascist], and I’m damn proud of it! He didn’t buy my vote -- he was the best goddamn candidate! *JUST WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!’*” (Or something like that.) At this, the everyone from the New Jersey delegation rose, stomping their feet on the ground and whistling, some shouting and calling for the death of the speaker on stage. I joined in myself, because I sure didn’t like that lady.

The real-life Congressman was rather taken aback by all this. I’m fairly certain that, while she would have been accustomed to arguing with passionate people, the state legislature rarely, if ever, lobbied for her decapitation. This was exactly what the crowd, whipped into a furor by the gentleman from New Jersey, was doing.

To be fair, the Congressman handled this rather well. She did not cower behind the podium, as many would have; nor did she shout back at the hostile New Jersey fellow, which would have spelled certain death. She made an attempt at an eloquent response, but was not successful (probably because she was in fear for her life).

After several minutes of yelling, during which I shouted myself hoarse, the storm died down. The lady finished her speech, though not very successfully. And then the Yale Model Congress President took the stage.

He announced that it was time to begin the first Committee Sessions. I looked at my schedule for a description of “Committee Sessions.” Ah, yes—this was the time designated for me to make a fool of myself in front of a group of fifteen. Fair enough. The man on the stage called the different committees. I was “D.O.D.” (Department of Defense, to the layperson). My group was called, and I set off with them.

We set off across the Yale campus, on our way to the spot designated for the first session. I discovered that there were two Branford people in my committee, Katie Brown and Jen Baldwin. I didn’t know them, but it made me feel somewhat safer.

It was raining. I had gel in my hair, because Senators don’t wear hats (according to Dad). The gel ran down my forehead and made my eyes sting. I made small talk with the two other Branfordians. It was a long walk, especially in the rain. Some people were already discussing their bills with the other delegates. They argued and bickered. Others were so excited about the coming events that they simply stared straight ahead, tongues hanging out of their mouths in anticipation. I tried to get the freakin’ gel out of my eyes.

Finally, we arrived at our destination—a large, old-looking structure of brick. Soaking wet, we went inside, and entered Classroom A-14. This was the place. Wooden desks were lined up before a large oaken desk, which stood in front of a chalkboard. The back wall was lined with large windows. The rain made an audible tapping sound when it hit them, and rivulets of water ran down the panes.

Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention something. I couldn’t walk. I had undergone knee surgery barely a month previously, and my left leg was secured in a foam-and-plastic “leg immobilizer.” With it on, I was as adept at motion as someone with a wooden limb. I could not flex my knee to any extent (that was the point), and could therefore not ascend stairs very well. That would come back and bite me in the ass later, as they say.

Anyway, we all sat down. Our chair took off his jacket and introduced himself as Zander. Yes, that was really his name, or so he said. I looked around the room. Most of the males were dressed in svelte suits with somber black ties. I was wearing khakis, a green shirt, a tweed jacket that I found in the attic, and a blue-and-orange tie with chameleons on it. Quite honestly, I looked a bit out of place.

Zander the Chair announced that he would entertain points or motions on the floor. When he said that, I laughed. Who wouldn’t? The phrase calls to mind the image of Zander doing something to amuse whatever points or motions happen to be on the floor at the time. I picture points or motions as creatures something like the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*, wearing “P” or “M” sweaters to distinguish the points from the motions. In my mind, they are standing around on the floor, looking up at a stage, where Zander is juggling flaming torches or being shot out of a cannon. But, of course, that was not what he meant, because stuff like that doesn’t happen at Model Congress, although it would be funny if it did. What he meant was, “Does someone want to introduce a

bill?" Someone did, of course. Hands went up faster than the eye could see. Zander pointed at a boy in the front row. From the looks of it, he was so excited that he was about to wet himself.

This boy stood up and strode to the front of the room. He said that his bill was in the packet we had been given, and that it was entitled "A Bill to Implement an Army of Robots to Fight In U.S. Wars." I took out the bill and looked it over. It was preposterous. It stipulated that Congress would allocate billions and billions of dollars to create a robot army. These robots would be metallic and have glowing red eyes -- this is a direct quote, and I am not making it up -- "to inspire fear in the enemy." I couldn't believe it. I had thought that this was supposed to be serious. This was like something out of *Star Wars*. I wondered if all the bills would be like this. I had expected somber themes that seriously addressed the greater good of the nation. This was more along the lines of "A Resolution to Make Carl Spackler Secretary of Defense." (If you are not familiar with Mr. Spackler, please take my word for it that he would probably make a very poor Secretary of Defense.) I was flabbergasted.

I sat back and watched while the boy introduced his bill. I sat back and watched while it was debated. I sat back and watched while it was amended. I did vote on the bill, but I did not think particularly hard about my choice; I simply raised my placard with the majority. As one might expect, the general consensus was a resounding "no." I sat back contentedly, my first legislative action complete.

Zander the Chair then spoke: "Are there any points of personal privilege?" This means, "Does anyone have to go to the bathroom?" No one did, so we introduced another bill.

A boy rose from the row behind me. He strode confidently to the front of the room, acknowledging us with a smile. And he launched into his bill. His opening sentence sounded something like this: "Whereas the federalistic budgetorial bureaucracy of the emblematic covert-op snookerbean, accompanied by and wherewithal association xenophobia accord retroactive, be it hereby resolved by the Yale Model Congress, that existentialism, disestablishmentarianism regarding manifest, cornucopia, etc., woon." I recognized perhaps three or four words in the entire thing. I wondered if the rest of them were fake. They certainly could have been, and I would have been none the wiser. I sat back and listened, astounded at the sheer length of some of the terms this kid was spitting out.

It turned out that this boy's name was Senator MacAteer. I don't remember exactly what his bill dealt with (actually, I never really knew it in the first place), but it passed with flying colors, probably because no one else could understand it either. In talking to him after the session, it became clear that Senator MacAteer was the smartest boy who ever lived. In general conversation, he was almost as unintelligible as the language in his bill.

Thus ended the first day of Model Congress. The next day was Yale Day, which, predictably, is a day For Yale. You walk around the campus with Petela and Mr. Miles and learn about lots of cool stuff, like how the administration doesn't care if you display hard liquor in your dorm window. When you go to Yale Day, you don't wear Congressman clothes; you wear normal attire. My Congressman clothes were in a backpack that I was wearing, along with my shoes, my materials, and, apparently, a few dozen bricks. Altogether, it weighed maybe 634 pounds.

Had I forgotten that I was on crutches? Maybe. Whatever the case, after ten minutes of walking (crutching), or maybe five seconds, it became clear that there was no way I would be able to cart this thing around. To get the idea of the physical effort required to tote such a thing on crutches, imagine doing push-ups with Roseanne sitting on your back. For three hours. Every time I tried to swing my body forward, the sheer weight of the bag would pull me in the opposite direction, nearly to a point where it would be impossible to resist the pull of gravity, whereupon I would crash-land in a backward somersault, probably splitting my head open. If I survived the crash, I would simply be stranded, because I could never have arisen from a prostrate position without the use of my leg. So I would have starved to death on the sidewalk in New Haven, my legacy being a skeleton grasping two crutches in a death grip and wearing a backpack filled with lead and a blue blazer. Only my fear of such a fate kept me going.

So, I managed to drag myself around downtown New Haven for a couple of hours. Then we headed off to our final destination, which was Payne Whitney Gymnasium. Payne Whitney is the largest gymnasium in the country. It has its own basketball court, pool, rowing area, polo field, zip code, etc. If I were to rank the worst possible places on Earth to explore on crutches, Payne Whitney would be a close third overall, behind Mt. Everest and the trenches of France.

We entered the gym and headed up a large staircase, which was perhaps three miles long. Then, we entered the basketball court, where Petela told us about his Yale career, because he is the best basketball player ever. I deeply respect Petela, both as an athlete and as a mentor. He is a man to be admired. He is also my AP History teacher next year, so I hope he reads this.

We exited the court and headed up some more stairs. These led to more stairs, which in turn led to more stairs. At this point, I began to see some kind of sick pattern. The stairways were the wraparound kind, like those at Branford High that lead from F-Wing to the library. We climbed these for maybe an hour or two.

Have you, the reader, ever tried to climb stairs on crutches? If not, then be advised that if you want to die a quick death via a broken neck, climbing stairs on crutches is the way to go. If you want to increase your chances of dying, then wear a backpack filled with formal clothing attire. This, if you'll remember, was what I did. For maybe four hours. Obviously, the Branford delegation had taken a wrong turn at the corner of Wooster and Crown, and we had ended up at the Empire State Building, or a structure with a comparable staircase mileage. We hiked around until midafternoon, then walked out into the New Haven sunlight. We all felt lucky, having been so enlightened in regard to staircase structure at Payne Whitney Gym. It was really something to write home about.

So anyway, the first two days passed. I never said a word. I just sat there and practiced my signature on the bill packet, improving it vastly over the next several days. But, after spending forty-eight hours in complete and utter silence, I vowed that the third day would see me speak. I was a bit apprehensive about it, in the sense that one would be apprehensive about a colonoscopy. But that did not weaken my resolve, nor serve to deter me from the task at hand.

And so I did it. It was no big deal. HAHA! JUST KIDDING! It was the most terrifying moment of my life. I stood to speak, cleared my throat once or twice or seventeen times, and then—I am not making this up—my leg began to shake uncontrollably. Not my bad leg—that was in the knee immobilizer, remember—my good leg. Out of sheer anxiety, my lower extremities were gripped with some kind of seizure. I considered grabbing it, trying to make it stop, but then thought better of it. Trying to ignore this, I began to talk, and realized that I was speaking in the same pitch as a your average Chipmunk. Every few words, my voice would

drop five or six hundred octaves, down to about James Earl Jones level. Basically, I alternated between Alvin and Mufasa. I actually felt as though I was going to pass out; the room began to spin uncontrollably. Considering these symptoms now, I think that I did have a seizure. It's really surprising that no one tried to wrestle a spoon into my mouth, which would have been really embarrassing.

I don't quite remember what happened when I finished talking; I was probably too busy pondering my brush with death. Nonetheless, I spoke again later that day. The speech was in regard to the payment of the armed services. When I finished, Senator Lawrence Wooster (yes, that was really his name) posed a question. The query -- I swear I am not making this up -- was thus: "Would the speaker lend his support to a proposal increasing, parallel and proportionate to the increase suggested by the statement at hand, wage-based premiums for veterans, which would seem to be tantamount to the bill in question? If so, why the inconsistency?" My first mental response was, of course: Screw you, Wooster! I had no idea what the question meant. It seemed hostile, but maybe, in fact, he was agreeing with me. I certainly had no way of knowing, and therefore had no way of responding. I seriously considered answering the question with the word "seven," because then he would have been the perplexed one. At any rate, I had to come up with a response. So I said: "No." Then I took my seat. Wooster looked very confused. Maybe, in fact, he *did* agree with me. I guess I'll never know.

On Saturday night, I attended the Delegate Dance. As one might surmise, this is a dance for the delegates. It was held in the dining hall of some college. I, of course, had a distinct amount of trouble dancing, which tends to require at least minimal bending of the knees. So I mostly just stood around and talked. I was doing just this, conversing with several friends of mine, when something very embarrassing, very odd, and very terrifying occurred.

You must first understand that the most prevalent activity at such functions as these is "grinding." It is generally the female who performs this act upon the male. To get the basic idea of grinding, picture my dog. My dog, like most other dogs, has made it her life's mission to mate with everything in sight. She therefore walks around attempting copulation with everything in sight, including, but not limited to, other dogs, chairs, the T.V., the leg of Dad's boss, etc. These attempts at procreation are first-rate examples of grinding. At the dance, a number of females simply became grinding machines; not thinking, simply reacting to the presence of a male leg in their vicinity.

Anyway, I was just standing around, minding my own business, when I was accosted by a girl that outweighed me by approximately 1,762 lbs. She proceeded to -- you guessed it -- eat me. No, just kidding, she made an attempt at a grind.

I'm still confused. Did she think that I was on crutches just for the hell of it? That I would be overcome by a grinding-induced fit of passion and cast away my brace, fully healed, her charms acting as the waters of Lourdes? I don't know. But anyway, I had no idea what to do. So I just stood there. Of course, without mutual consent, grinding is difficult. The overall effect was similar to that of an elephant trying to copulate with a mailbox. I tired of this quickly, which is understandable. So I walked away, simply leaving the overzealous delegate stuck in mid-grind. It was really the only thing to do.

I went and sat down for a while, talking with some other Branford people. But, eventually, they migrated over to the dance floor. Let me explain something here: I hate dancing. I hate it more than anything, in fact, with the possible exception of Advisory Days. Why do I hate it? Well, the core reason is that I cannot dance. I have been known to try, but it never really works out. In fact, I make an absolute fool of myself. I have, in the past, attempted to figure out why. I am decently coordinated; I like music; my name is not Jim Marquis (since, you Mrs. Schwan, have him for class, you can understand my meaning). So what is the problem? I will probably never know. But my dancing can be compared to the movement of a marionette controlled by somebody with Parkinson's. A little twistin', a little bouncin', a little shakin', a little bakin', but mostly just an uncontrolled, violent motion that calls to mind the scene in *Alien* wherein the hideous man-eater from planet Zoomba explodes out of the guy's chest. Remember how the man shuddered and bucked like a horse when they got him on the table, almost as if something was about to pop out of his torso? That's me on the dance floor. So, understandably, I usually have no desire to get my boogie on. Even if I manage to avoid dancing -- always the overriding objective -- I end up getting accosted by a 600 lbs. grinding machine, or something like that. So, in general, I try to stay away from any place where dancing might occur.

However, I was faced with a predicament. Should I journey to the dance floor, thereby assuming all the risks associated with such a perilous trip? I obviously did not want to. On the other hand, there was nobody from Branford sitting around. Did I really want to lounge by myself -- just my crutches and I -- until someone came back? No. So I chose the lesser of two evils and proceeded across the floor to the area of dancing.

I managed to survive the trip itself. I passed several compulsive grinders, including one who was making her move on a strobe light. Ah, yes -- strobe lights. I have just one question about strobe lights -- What is the point? They flash in your eyes, blinding you; they warp reality so that everyone seems to be vibrating uncontrollably, which makes you nauseated; and, most importantly, they have an alarming tendency to throw unprepared observers into epileptic fits. In fact, at some establishments, employees walk around with spoons to thrust into the mouths of unfortunate seizure victims. And yet, strobe lights are popping up everywhere. In general, I try to avoid going blind, throwing up, and having seizures. Therefore, I view strobe lights as being very counter-productive to my personal goals, and try to avoid them whenever possible. But I was forced to walk through a veritable sea of strobing on my way to dance. I also encountered fog machines in large quantities. You know the monster movies, where some terrible creature sneaks up on people through a mist so thick that he has to push it aside before devouring them? That's what a fog machine does. The air actually feels wet. The strobe lights reflect off of this stuff with utter ferocity. The situation, if it can be compared to anything, is probably closest to a firefight with the Viet Cong in a monsoon outside Ho Chi Min, except the air is much more wet. Also, 600 lbs. grinding machines are always lurking in the distance, like *Gorillas In The Mist*, so it's a lot scarier.

After I reached the dance floor, everyone was leaving, because the dance was over. We went home on the bus, arriving to BHS around 1:30am. The next day was the last day—one more full session, then the closing ceremonies. It was nothing to write home about. Actually, maybe it was; I was so tired that I just kind of followed the person in front of me wherever we went, falling asleep whenever I stopped moving for more than five or ten seconds. I don't quite remember how, but I ended up back at my house, in my bed, at about three that afternoon. I had survived it—Conor, the MC delegate, alive to debate another day.

One year has now elapsed since I set down the previous selection. It has been twice that long, then, since I first boarded the bus to Yale and set off to meet my Maker. Now in my junior year, I have three Yale congresses under my belt, including the fateful campaign two years past. Allow me to describe them quickly, keeping in mind my woeful inadequacy as a crippled, cowering freshman.

Ironically, that first congress may have been the “start of something beautiful.” Whatever that experience has begotten, it has certainly been nice-looking thus far, and I hope that it will continue to develop according to plan. As I have mentioned, I attended Yale for a second time my sophomore year. However, after my sub par performance during the previous campaign, it was decided that I lacked the proper credentials to attend as a full-fledged delegate. Rather, I took up the role of a curious creature called a “shadow.” A shadow does not have his own placard, or briefcase, or bill packet. In fact, he really has no identity to speak of; my chair opted to refer to me only as “Shadow,” as if that were my given moniker. While Shadow is an excellent name for a dog, it is highly out of place in the Model Congress arena, and it is therefore quite embarrassing to be referred to as such. Nonetheless, the conference was a much more satisfactory experience than its predecessor had been. Thankfully, it offered none of the terrifying elements posited by my first endeavor; however, the congress did not witness a complete metamorphosis on my part. While I spoke more frequently, with greater poise and less seizure-type activity, I shall be the first to tell you that I was no public-speaking giant. Make no mistake: I did have my moments, especially when I joined forces with one Benjamin Conlon. Mr. Conlon, an actual delegate, proposed a somewhat ludicrous bill that granted a \$99.99 calculator to every student in the United States, possibly including non-math pupils and maybe even those studying for the priesthood. It was concluded that the cost exceeded the annual education budget by only several billion dollars, but the bill was nonetheless rejected by a vote of 15-3 (the three being myself, Mr. Conlon, and a boy called Cotton Kelley. Yes, that was actually his name. Or so he said.) At any rate, this result provoked widespread outrage on the part of the BHSMC team. For the remainder of the conference, the occasion became my ace-in-the-hole when it came to debate. Exchanges such as the following became the norm:

Delegate Ravi Kaneiria: “...And that’s why we should provide inner-city students with new books. According to a recent study, only 40% of such volumes were printed post-Eisenhower administration, and most no longer have pages.”

Chair: “I will now recognize a two-minute con speech. How about you, Shadow?”

Me: “How can you *possibly* talk about *new books* when we can’t even hand out decent *calculators?!....*”

Such rousing speeches did not particularly endear the other delegates to yours truly. But boy, were those oratories electric. While Conlon and myself were boring and mediocre solo, we were positively world-beaters when we joined forces, a bit like Lennon and McCartney. And thus went the story of YMC, Round Two -- when in doubt, fall back on the calculators. I was frequently in doubt, and my speeches all seemed eerily similar.

One year later, I returned for another go-round. Now a junior, I was limbered up and ready for action. I attended as a true delegate on the strength my performance as a sophomore. In my committee was one Jared Ceccolini, himself a first-timer. I had visions of a Reardon-Ceccolini tag-team, much like the Reardon-Conlon alliance of the year before. However, upon opening up debate in the first committee session, I came to a novel realization: I could do this *myself*. I did not need backup; I did not need support. I was not Lennon without McCartney; I was Simon without Garfunkel (a vast improvement, in my opinion). I had the capability to think my own thoughts, to formulate my own ideas, to express my original arguments in a manner that seemed to be persuasive and even a little articulate. I spoke as much as possible. I made pro speeches, con speeches, and everything in between. Model Congress, I realized, is not merely something to slap on a transcript and ship off to college; it is an experience of its own, one that is enjoyable and vastly rewarding.

My third congress put all others to shame. I debated engrossing topics with intelligent individuals, including the great-grandson (there may be multiple “greats,” I’m not entirely positive) of John D. Rockefeller. (He was, I might add, a slacker to beat all slackers.) I wandered the city of New Haven. I sampled the finest fare the municipality has to offer; that is to say, Louis & the Doodle burgers and Naples pizza. I met my future wife. I absolutely tore it up at the delegate dance, successfully repressing my encounter with the girl who tried to mate with my leg. I’d describe my performance at the dance here, but you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. There is video footage and photos, if you’d like. See Petela.

For my efforts in committee session, I was awarded the Distinguished Speaker Award, better known as a gavel. This prize is given to (surprise) the speaker who most distinguishes himself in committee. It is a nice thing to receive, and a far cry from my crutch-bearing, voice-cracking, seizure-inducing, leg-being-humped-by-a-great-big-fat-person endeavor of two years before. My relationship with Model Congress has blossomed from its humble and terrifying beginnings. I can say without a touch of hyperbole that, since ninth grade, Model Congress has cultivated my intellectual and social growth beyond all other influences.

The End -- Or Just The Beginning...

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