

MODELS FOR SUCCESS

Every year, Saint Stephen's students travel to Washington, New York and Boston to serve as delegates at Congress and United Nations simulations that challenge them to think, debate and discover more about themselves.

By David Glaser

The journey started more than 20 years ago with teacher Pat Murphy and one interested student. They trekked together to Boston to participate in the Harvard Model Congress, a congressional simulation sponsored by its namesake university since 1986. Today, the path to HMC and similar conferences in New York City and Washington D.C., have become an annual rite for three dozen Upper School students.

"The idea really grew from me looking for an

opportunity for our kids to have something extracurricular other than sports to put on their college resumes," said Murphy, a social sciences faculty member for more than 30 years. "Unlike now, we didn't have much else. I thought it was worth a try."

Word of mouth about that first trip spread quickly, and 16 students registered for the encore the following year. The momentum has never slowed. In September, 67 SSES students auditioned for 36 slots on delegations headed for the HMC, Columbia Model United Nations and Princeton Model Congress.

At each conference, students polish their public speaking skills, role play and network with peers from around the country, as well as compete for recognition as outstanding delegates. Saint Stephen's is the only Sarasota/Bradenton area school, and one of just a small handful in Florida, that offers this opportunity for its students. The SSES delegations have consistently established themselves as valuable contributors and award winners at the three conventions which are widely recognized as the most challenging in the country.

HMC, the largest model congress in the U.S., provides students

with a hands-on approach to the political process. After being assigned roles as sitting legislators, journalists and advisors, delegates put their nation's democratic institution to the test. Students are challenged to improve their public speaking, negotiation, creative problem-solving and leadership skills.

The Princeton Model Congress is the oldest in America and takes place just down the street from Capitol Hill – literally a five-minute walk away. Participants experience an added dimension of realism as they research and write their own bills on topics pertinent to their committee and based on their individual interests.

The focus of the Columbia Model UN is on global issues. The convention is run as a crisis conference offering challenging, innovative and original committees that range from historical time periods to iconic pop culture themes such as Star Wars or Marvel Comics. Delegates tour the United Nations, attend briefings by Columbia University professors, and debate a variety of international issues where the ability to think and speak extemporaneously are in high demand.

"I love the idea of getting our kids out of Bradenton, putting them in a situation with other bright kids with aspirations much like their own, and having them really push themselves to compete, make friendships and grow just like they will when they get to college," Murphy said. "Every good private school on the east coast, all the good schools in New York City are there and our students always go up and hold their own."

Even more impressive, according to Murphy, is that the majority of the schools participating consider the conventions the culmination of a regular class or after-school activity that prepares them for that event. In contrast, the Saint Stephen's teams are chosen in one afternoon audition by a group of student peers who have past experience as successful delegates. Murphy acts as the guide, but nearly all of the preparation and research for the conferences is done by the students on their own, outside of school.

The results speak to the quality and dedication of the SSES delegates. In recent years, the Columbia delegation was honored as the best small group in attendance, and seven of the 11 students at Harvard in 2016 returned to Saint Stephen's with individual awards.

In addition to the academic challenge, the trips also challenge the students in very practical ways.

"A lot of the kids tell me they've been to a big city, but that was most likely with their parents. On these trips they have some free time where they're allowed to explore – in groups of three – and they have to find their way around, plan their itinerary, figure out how the subway lines run," Murphy said.

"It's all about teaching them leadership. Some get there and don't think they can do it, but discover that they can. There are a lot of lessons learned and I have students come to me all the time and tell me that this experience made all the difference in the world for them. They feel more confident about their ability to speak in front of people and argue their point. Those are really valuable skills."

