

AS I SAT AT A TABLE in the corner of a cafe, hunched over a press release I was writing, I asked myself, “Why is a youth advocate from Long Island, halfway around the world in South Africa this summer, debating issues of sustainable development at a United Nations conference?” I needed to meet a deadline for the Youth Caucus at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) after an exhausting but exhilarating day of lobbying. My goal was to help persuade world leaders at the largest United Nations conference in history that pursuing sustainable development is essential for the future of our planet. Because I had attended a previous UN conference about children’s rights, I understood the importance of sustainable development in this context. Then, I was chosen to represent Sustain US, a national network of American youth, at the WSSD. I raised all of the money needed for my trip. I was thrilled to witness the human spirit in its purest sense, taking collective action to care for the less fortunate around the globe.

It was quite another to visit Soweto, only a few kilometers away from the conference, and to meet poor Africans living in shanties with limited access to water. This observation embedded in my mind the seriousness of my work in a way that no statistic could describe. The challenge on paper seemed quite different from the harshness of Soweto and Alexandria and the long-suffering faces and pleading eyes of the beggars there. I reminded myself that I needed to work around the clock while I was in South Africa to help these impoverished people.

After arriving in Johannesburg this past August, I traveled to the International Youth Summit. I drafted the youth declaration which was used for lobbying, and I helped to write a statement from the youth delegates for government representatives to read and consider while negotiating. While at the WSSD, aside from writing daily press releases that became Associated Press and Reuters articles, I drafted speeches which were presented to the delegates, including over one hundred heads of state. I experienced an adrenaline rush when I fielded questions from reporters during a press conference. These challenging situations were new learning opportunities for me and provided me with knowledge much different from what one learns in high school. I want to learn more about the histories of international financial institutions and the ways they interact with national governments.

As a result of my attending the World Summit, I have gained a new perspective on global politics and its effects on people’s lives. The thought that people from around the world can join together to solve a global issue never fails to impress and inspire me. My participation in the WSSD has taught me more about the convergence of politics, international relations and the environment than I have learned in any other activity or in the classroom. Working with others to reveal the crucial need for sustainable development is essential to our world’s successful future. All of my experiences have helped me to understand how international meetings operate and to accept the responsibility that comes with the privilege to attend and contribute to the solution.