

Third Place
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The Human Rights Council

47 Human Rights Council delegates wait with bated breath, our glances darting around the eggshell yellow conference room. We've been through the rules, raised our placards for attendance, considered each other's opening statements. In seconds, a flurry of note-passing, alliance-forming, and resolution-writing will begin.

The gavel falls.

"We are now in unmoderated caucus."

47 seats lurch, and I clutch my legal pad. It's my first Model United Nations conference, and despite all my research, I don't know what to expect. But before I can hesitate, the delegate from the United Kingdom drops a note onto my desk. "Loved your speech, New Zealand. Back of the room, let's talk," it reads.

I stand up, straighten my blazer collar, and stride through the crowd.

Practice simulations can't compare. Aside from a few classmates, I don't know a soul in the room. But it doesn't matter, I'm prepared to debate. I join the group of countries, both allies and opponents.

Over the next few days, we discussed LGBT rights and the rights of the accused. I took a central role in debate, authoring amendments, making deals, and eventually, presenting our finished resolution. I made a point to listen to counterarguments and seek compromise while following my country's policy. *Yes, New Zealand understands the difficulty of changing cultural norms, and will consider adding a preambulatory clause to address this. But no, we will continue to oppose homosexuality bans. How about introducing public education programs?*

Inside and outside of committee sessions, I got to know the other delegates: Model UN veterans with 100-page research binders, a group of students that traveled to the conference from Mexico, LGBT activists representing countries with anti-LGBT policies. As we talked, whether about compromises, college, or Parks and Recreation, I realized that the more we understood each other, the better we worked together.

At the end of the conference, tired yet content, I got ready to leave the hotel with the rest of my team. But first, two of the delegates I debated with the most—Trinidad and Tobago and the Russian Federation—stopped me in the lobby.

"I just wanted to say, I loved working with you in committee," one said. "I learned a lot from you."

On the bus ride home, I reflected. Somehow, in an unfamiliar situation, I was able to take initiative and gain the respect of my fellow delegates. Through collaboration, I became a leader.

Think of adjectives that describe a leader. Some may ring of strength—“goal-oriented,” “bold,” “determined.” It’s important for leaders to know what they seek, to take risks, and to be persistent. But it’s also important for a leader to be diplomatic, to work closely with peers, and to step outside of their comfort zone and consider all possibilities.

Words like “collaborative,” “creative,” and “open-minded” form the essence of 21st century leadership. In a world that’s often polarized, these traits are essential to innovation. While my knowledge of my country’s policy and personal dedication to protecting human rights prepared me for the conference, my willingness to broaden my perspective and look for unexpected solutions prepared me for productive debate. Alongside the relationships I formed with my fellow delegates, this willingness and creativity propelled me towards success.

In eggshell yellow conference rooms, in hotel lobbies, and wherever else my future will lead me, I’ll remember my experience in the Human Rights Council. Effective leadership doesn’t depend solely on the leader’s strength, it depends on collaboration and thinking out of the box. It’s not about one person—it’s about many working together.