

Something Worthwhile

written by Guest Contributor | February 28, 2017



In early February, a few of my classmates and I visited Washington, D.C. for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference. While I'm interested in politics, I'm first and foremost a fiction writer, a profession that has, unfortunately, begun to feel almost silly to me in light of Trump's presidency. How, I sometimes wonder, can I sit around writing short stories when people's lives are literally at stake? I realize this assessment of what I do is unfair, but an urgency to fight against Trump struck me when he first took office, and it hasn't left me alone. I've called my congressmen and written editorials against Trump, but none of it felt like enough. Finally, I had the chance to do something more immediate, something worthwhile. I was going to see our lawmakers face-to-face.

I wasn't planning to go alone, of course. Writers, as a population, tend to hate Trump—after all, he hates us—so I was able to tag along with a group called Georgia Writers Resist, which consisted of roughly twenty conference-goers from around the state. Our job before the conference was to either write or collect letters from other people on specific issues; mine, for example, was concerned with the proposed cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts. Once we were in D.C., we would hand deliver them personally during an hour-long meeting we had scheduled with staffers from both Perdue and Isakson's offices in the Russell Building, located just behind the Capitol.

Staffers. Not actual senators. That was the first red flag, a sign that our meeting would not be as productive as I'd hoped. Isakson's office sent us legislative correspondent Mary Catherine Cromley, and Perdue's was represented by Counsel Drew Robinson. Isakson, at least, had an actual excuse for not attending—he would be in Georgia that day holding a town hall meeting. But Perdue had no alibi, leaving me with no other option but to assume he simply did not want to spend his lunch hour stuck in a room with angry constituents. The staffers didn't want to, either, and it was obvious. Through their facial expressions alone, it was evident they weren't used to having twenty angry, eloquent women (and two men!) confront them with such underhanded liberal devices as logic and facts.

At twenty-one-years-old, I think I was the youngest person there; with a few other exceptions, everyone else seemed to be in their mid-thirties or older.

I was also one of the five or six people who'd volunteered to speak. As one of the few people on the planet who enjoys public speaking, I had planned my speech days in advance: I would introduce my oversized family of nine, explain how all seven of us children are creatively inclined, that among us there are actors, musicians, writers, and artists. With that established, I'd hone in on one of my little sisters who's currently involved in a community theatre that receives some of its funding from the Georgia Council for the Arts, which in turn gets half of its funding from the NEA. How, I would ask, do you propose my sister prepare for a career in theatre if the NEA is cut, especially when our rural high school has no theatre department? Then I would hit them with some damning statistics. I had a list in my hand, bulleted and everything. I was ready to go.

Our meeting started off well enough. We were given a spacious conference room, cordial introductions, and, it seemed, a rare chance to speak our minds in a place where it counted. The first two speeches went well, but pretty soon our conversation spiraled into questions that resulted in no answers. Here's an example, taken verbatim from a transcript of the meeting:

Writer: What was the rationale for voting for DeVos?

Mary Catherine: I don't handle education.

Even worse:

Mary Catherine: [during a discussion of the Affordable Care Act] Any replacement plan that anybody would come up with would keep essential parts for preexisting conditions, keeping kids on parents' insurance.

Writer: Why repeal it, then?

Mary Catherine: There are bad parts. Personally, I don't handle health care. I don't want to give you all bad information.

At that point, the meeting devolved into a discussion of which issues Mary Catherine is educated on, but I'll be nice and give her the benefit of the doubt. I know she's been trained to evade questions—she's in politics. It's part of the job description. This essay might have included more of her artful dodges had she not tried to kick us out fifteen minutes early.

That's right. Exactly forty-three minutes into our hour-long meeting, the meeting we'd had scheduled weeks in advance, she attempted to force us out.

"So we do have another meeting here in 2 minutes," she said. "We have gone 15 minutes over. Our allotted time was 30 minutes."

The rest of our conference was fraught with indignation. The women in our group persisted, telling their stories even though they'd been silenced, but I sat mute, unable to make myself enter the verbal fray. My speech suddenly seemed ridiculous, inconsequential. I knew the staffers didn't care what I had to say; they merely wanted us gone. And with ten minutes left in our scheduled meeting time, we were.

Somehow, one of our members was able to talk Drew into walking us to Perdue's office, where we could pick up business cards with contact information for Perdue's other staffers, and I realized I had one last chance to speak. Drew and I could talk on the way to the office. Confronted with just one person—a shy, sweet college student, no less—he'd have to listen. Brazenly I fell in step beside him and asked if he minded me sharing what I'd intended to say in the meeting. With his blessing, I launched into my prepared spiel: "I came here today to talk about the NEA—"

"What does that stand for?" he asked.

I nearly stopped in my tracks. "The National Endowment for the Arts."

"Oh. And what do they do?"

The NEA, for those of you who aren't aware, matches whatever funding the Georgia Council for the Arts gets from the state. Rural arts programs (like my community theatre back home) and metropolitan museums alike thrive on their generous donations. This makes a huge difference in our economy: just last year, Georgia pulled in \$29 billion dollars in revenue from its creative industries alone. The NEA is of vital importance to this state's communities, students, and artists. It is important to people like me, and this man did not even know what it was.

My heart deflated. We crowded into the elevator and I considered how stupid it would be to cry. In either naivety or optimism, I suppose I'd expected a more positive outcome, some concrete evidence that the hours I'd put into writing my letter and gathering signatures and assembling a speech would change the world for the better. Instead, I was given a few business cards and some Chick-Fil-A waffle chips and told to have a nice day.

It is very easy to feel powerless when your government is blatantly trying to ignore you, to let yourself succumb to passivity and despair. Doing so is also a little less humiliating—if you don't go through the trouble of bothering your senators, you don't have to go through the pain and outrage of having them dismiss you. But if I had the option to return to Washington and meet with more of my senators' staffers, I absolutely would, and I'll tell you why: Our elected officials sometimes forget this government is run by the people because they aren't reminded enough that the people are out there. I may not have gotten to deliver my speech, but I was nevertheless part of an important effort in jogging the collective memory of our forgetful officials. Make no mistake—what we did mattered. We brought over 700 letters from concerned Georgians with us. We proved that our state isn't some nebulous constellation of faceless voters or numbers on a ballot, that we are real people. People with real faces, real stories, real anger.

Afterwards, I decided to salvage the rest of the afternoon by exploring the senators' office buildings and paying visits to a few of the politicians I admire. Elizabeth Warren's office doors were closed, but Bernie Sanders' were wide open. Even though he wasn't there, I had a quick conversation with some of his staffers.

"I actually just got out of a meeting with the Georgia senators' staffers," I told them, "so I needed to go somewhere more life-affirming."

They laughed and encouraged me to sign Bernie's guest book. As I wrote down my name, it occurred to me he'd probably never read it, but in that moment, I was happy. I'd shown up. I was there, all the way in Washington, D.C. It was enough.



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