

Report on Jinja International Youth Meeting 2009

The Jinja International Youth Meeting 2009 surpassed expectations: it had a lot to live up to after the last two years. The Champion students were, once again, exemplary ambassadors for the school and the sixth form in particular. The six students representing Champion were Ellis Basford, Ellice Coleman, Millie Kempley, Jacob Mitchell, Kieran O'Brien and Charlotte Street. The quality of their presentations and their contributions to discussions demonstrated the time and effort they had put in to researching their topics to enable them to be informative and to have the confidence to encourage their audience to become involved in their topics.

Each of the Champion students had an input into the topics under discussion: Charlotte Street on Global Citizenship; Ellis Basford on Sustainable Development; Ellice Coleman on Social Enterprise; Jake Mitchell on Social Justice; Kieran O'Brien on Conflict Resolution; and Millie Kempley on Restorative Justice. The Champion students worked on their presentations with students from Chenderit and Ferrers from Northamptonshire and three Ugandan schools – M.M. Wairaka College, Jinja; Mengo School, Kampala; and Iganga Secondary School, Iganga. Having worked with these schools before, it was of particular pleasure to me to renew acquaintance with staff I had worked with in previous years and generally catch up on every one's news.

On the first evening of the conference, the students discussed their topics in groups of three and four and the best way to present them. The teachers were invited to chair the sessions, along with two other U.K. visitors, Ingrid Pollard, a photographer who had just completed a year as artist in residence at Chenderit and David Baker, an entrepreneur who is keen to promote his social enterprise links with Uganda. These opening talks were a good way for the students to get to know each other as they had to finish the evening by telling everyone several facts that they had learnt about the people in their group, including the teachers. The quality and focus of the discussions generated also showed that the topics were appropriate to the students' interests and that they had all done their research well. Even more gratifying was the way in which they absorbed each other's examples in support of their arguments, thus opening up their knowledge (and hopefully understanding) of each other's cultures. Such was the students' anxiety to be properly prepared that they were given an extra hour on Saturday morning to finish their preparations.

At 9am on Saturday morning the conference began with further preparation and then the topics themselves were presented. Each session began with individual presentations of 3 – 5 minutes and then the topic was opened up to the floor: all students (and teachers) were fully involved in this. Two topics were discussed before lunch and then after lunch came a few hours of free time when students attempted to complete the challenge course and play volley ball; the

teachers who had participated in this in previous years (i.e. me) decided to walk down to Lake Victoria instead. On Saturday evening a third topic was discussed.

Sunday morning began at the crack of dawn, literally: I got the Champion girls up to watch the sun rise over Lake Victoria at 6 am, followed by a walk around the Discovery Centre grounds with Ellice (the others had gone back to bed to try to get some more sleep) to enjoy the sounds and sights of Africa waking up. This experience obviously made an impression as the boys got themselves up the following morning without any prompting and on Tuesday most of us did it again.

The discussions recommenced at 9 am and during the afternoon free time we visited Bujugali Falls; the site of a controversial development – a dam across the Nile to produce hydro electric power- which was the focus of one of the topics earlier in the day. On Friday the U.K. students were able to visit the construction site of this controversial dam, thanks to the intervention of Agnes Nabirye, the Speaker of Jinja District Council who also came to join us on Saturday to listen to some of the discussions taking place and to address the students. We were able to visit the construction site last year and it was astonishing to see how much had been built. The saddest aspect of the Sunday afternoon visit, however, from my point of view, was the fact that in 2007 when I first visited the Falls the dam was merely a plan and next year the Falls (if there is anything left of them) will be completely different; I can completely understand local feeling about the loss of this spectacular part of the river Nile.

Sunday evening was a time for cultural exchanges: the Discovery Centre Staff built a campfire so that the meat-eaters could roast goat and everyone could sing or offer some contribution to the entertainment. The singing of the English students was enthusiastic but inconsistent; the dancing... well, the best dancing had been done earlier in the day at Bujugali Falls. The Champion girls wrote a poem (good effort for ten minutes' work) as a form of acknowledgement and appreciation of the poetry written by one of the Ugandan students, Timothy, who closed the conference on Monday with one of his poems. The evening was brought to a close with a rousing chorus of "Auld Lang Syne".

Monday morning began again at 9 am promptly: the students sat down to write a detailed report on the conference while the teachers discussed linking projects that were practical and appropriate to their curriculums (Champion will continue with "A life in the day of..." and in addition try an A level Biology link through two schools setting each other experiments to do). After lunch the Ugandan students went back to school and the English students were invited to visit M.M.Wairaka College which they walked to via the shore of Lake Victoria. Wairaka was formerly an agricultural college established in 1948 by the nearby sugar cane plantation and factory owner who saw it as a way of preparing workers for his factory. In 1972 it became a secondary school but the boy (700) girl (300) split shows that secondary education for girls is not as automatic right as it is in the U.K. The College buildings and boarding houses (at private secondary schools most students board, government secondary schools have only just started up) are in the most beautiful grounds which run down to Lake Victoria. The school's facilities for teaching and learning though are limited by U.K. standards: the school library would fit into the English Department's cupboard in B13!

Overall, the students were surprised by their enjoyment of the conference and how interested they actually were in the topics they were discussing. They found the debating process stimulating and have a desire to build upon the skills they have been developing over the last few days. The process of reflecting upon their experiences and going beyond the descriptive aspects of what had happened to them is something that will be an on-going process, judging from what students from the first trip have said. Each agree that it has been an amazing experience and each of them have been amazed by what the conference brought out in people that they thought they knew: their willingness to become involved in all activities and their ability to respond to challenging comments during the debates of the conference left all seven of us at various times with our jaws dropped in astonishment and admiration.

I was extremely proud of the students and thoroughly enjoyed being in their company.