



— Senator Venkata Yenuganti | Post 597 —

Being surrounded by brilliance is something that rarely happens to people, let alone young people like me. Yet, Boys Nation was a place where every single person had spectacular accolades, all the way from being an international theater sensation to being the transportation commissioner for their city to being a D1 recruited ivy league football player. When surrounded by young men of such caliber, the question becomes, “how is the leader of such a group of boys selected.”

From Day 1, it was apparent that it wasn’t just artificial networking or asking people to vote for you with the shake of a hand wasn’t going to cut it like it did at Boys’ State. Instead, true connection had to be made, and that was the first “jolt” for me. The second was on persuasion. At state, I advertised myself with experience to show I was a qualified candidate, but it was quickly made apparent that I was overshadowed. The key was trust. You had to get people to trust you to vote for you.

Thus, the challenge was to spend enough time with people to trust you, but not too much that you couldn’t get familiar with more than a majority of the people there. The second were the people running. From the nationalist party, my party, there were 15 people who ran for the position of vice president, within a party of 48 people (excluding the party secretary and party chairman). Of the 48, 13 were running for the presidential nomination, so the votes got tight.

While I lost the party nomination, it was because my opponent used his time better. We had 30 seconds so the better speaker didn’t win, but the one who used those 30 seconds wisely. That was a true lesson for time management at an intense level and was super interesting to see how those speeches played out.

The second level was the passage of bills. Each person went up to the stand and made a speech whether in pro or con of the bill being passed and this was the more intuitive level of debate where I noticed that about 50% of the room was quite proficient in debating, and knew the ins and outs of defending or attacking a bill. The other 50% shied away from the position were pretty inactive throughout the process, which was surprising for me at Boy’s nation.

The third was the keynote speech. I was chosen to provide a 10-minute speech on the party platform and being interesting yet formal was a challenge that I encountered and one



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that I had a lot of fun at. Overall the speech went decently but it wasn't too interesting which was something I learned to improve on, the rest of my duration at nation.

Yet, this was a week to shape a lifetime through friendships. Some of the bonds we forged were some of the strongest I've had, and being with a group of people similar to me was quite an experience, including meeting some super cool people like Carsen from Utah or Braden from South Carolina. I was able to see the diversity of thought all at once and bond with people in a fantastic fashion.

My learnings were three-fold:

- ✓ Trust isn't asked for, it's gained through time
- ✓ Time utilization is the most crucial thing in an election
- ✓ Making connections is the true honor that remains at the end of any interaction

Sincerely,
Venkata Y.

— Senator Rowen Hamilton | Post 179 —

To start, I'd like to thank the American Legion along with all the counselors and statesmen who made Boys State and Boys Nation possible. Walton F. Hoffman Memorial post 179 and Smithson Valley High School have forever changed my life for the better, and I intend on refining my leadership for the betterment of people in whatever capacity I lead them. My feelings and thoughts are too ample to fit in a testimonial, so I'll try to hit the highlights surrounding my experiences in the American Legion State and Nation programs.

To start, Texas Boys State was controlled chaos, and with over 800 high school boys, that seems like a reasonable description. Offensive linemen, tuba players, mathelites, and political junkies made my initial impressions of the program scattered at first. The election of our mayor was based on a game of shadow boxing, an internet trend I was completely unfamiliar with! I think Boys State, above all, taught me the value of servant leadership and the importance of communication. When I ran and won my race for Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, it was apparent that many people in my chamber had never written legislation before.



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As a student congress debater, my background knowledge in coordination with my willingness to engage with every member enabled their greatness to shine even brighter. Suddenly, personal stories and hardships were translated into actionable legislation after they became familiar with the format. My success and nomination to Boys Nation says nothing without the overwhelming support and achievement from each member of my Congress, working diligently to provide items for my agenda. I was moved by the emergent unity that each member contributed to. My final impression was one of awe, awe toward the process that compelled my peers to become their best selves through the creation of self-government.

However, attending Boys Nation was like diving into a pool of overachieving and hyperactive piranhas. While the intellectual and extracurricular diversity was the same, their engagement and love of their craft was apparent from the moment I spoke to them. At Boys Nation, everyone spoke well; everyone has been state competitors; everyone was a champion. I think my biggest lesson at Boys Nation was the value of being genuine. I saw a pattern from people who succeeded and those who failed. Senators failed when they tried to “get something” from people, miring in the turbulent opinions and votes thrown about by senators.

This mindset hurt their pursuits and impressions of the program as evidenced by comments made to me by various senators. “I wish I had...” or “I should have...” became hallmarks of friends who felt dissatisfied with their time in DC. Senators who succeeded, regardless of whether they won a position or not, formed fulfilling relationships by having conversations and vesting respect in people. When I was selected for this program, I sat down with my parents and had a conversation surrounding my intentions. I discovered a question that informed my pursuits: “For me, what would ‘winning’ look like at Nation?” Would winning a position be enough? To me, that answer was unsatisfactory, for losing in life is to be expected and plentiful. Losing with grace does not disqualify the value of Boys Nation.

Although I earned the position of Chairman of Committee 3 (Foreign Affairs, Finance, Government Affairs, Environment, Public Works, Indian Affairs, Intelligence), I understood my goal better when I ran for president, losing 24-26 in the primary process as the runner-up for the party nomination. My failure stung, but my gratitude for the outpouring of trust I had garnered from my peers made my defeat temporary. I’m confident that I, along with any other senator, would have been a phenomenal leader if bestowed the power. With that group of men, everyone was a winner in their own regard.



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Sanford Meisner, American actor and teacher defined acting as “living truthfully in imaginary circumstances,” and throughout my time with the American Legion, my mind kept coming back to this sentiment. I’m an actor, but my time at Boys State and Boys Nation transcended acting. I lived truthfully when I found companions, unwaveringly argued for my opinion, and promoted my candidacy.

I won at Boys State and Boys Nation, and now, I’ll win beyond Boys State and Boys Nation.

Thank you American Legion,

Rowen Hamilton

Boys State Speaker of the House / Boys Nation Senator from Texas

