

VOLUNTARY RESPONSE

Niagara College goes to Washington

by Laura Bickle

“Unique Event Management Opportunity” read the flyers posted on the bulletin boards in the halls of Niagara College’s Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., campus. Judging from the students’ experiences, unique doesn’t begin to cover it.

The conference was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual Policy Conference held at Walter E. Washington Convention Center and the Marriott Marquis Washington, DC, February 27 to March 3 and attended by 16,000 AIPAC supporters.

“It was one of the most phenomenal experiences of my career. I’ve never seen anything like it,” says Janet Jakobsen, CMP, professor of Hospitality & Tourism at Niagara College, who, along with 14 of her students, joined 250 others from 39 colleges and universities to work 16-hour days setting up, giving directions, managing crowd control, running sessions and doing whatever else the circumstances called for.

Rebecca Meiners, account manager of Precision Meetings & Events based in Alexandria, VA, which was in charge of on-site fulfillment, ran the recruitment program. “We really couldn’t do it without them,” she says, adding that all applicants were required to be enrolled in a hospitality program. The volunteers—who were called blue shirts due to their attire—received travel, food, accommodation and an honorarium for their efforts. All students had to be vetted by AIPAC beforehand and they were not allowed to take pictures or use social media.

Students were sent a comprehensive handbook prior to the event and attended a day-long orientation on the Saturday

before the conference started. The prep paid off. “The students were great about jumping in and filling roles on short notice,” says Peggy Marilley, founder and CEO of Precision Meetings & Events. “The attendees require a high level of personal customer service,” says Marilley, adding that little signage is used at the event. “AIPAC attendees prefer to get their information directly from the blue shirts.”

One of the challenges was the constant flux of the program, says Marilley, noting that the speech of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu amid US nuclear negotiations with Iran and his controversial address to the US Congress, precipitated last-minute heightened security measures, including ushering 16,000 attendees through two sets of metal detectors.

Jakobsen says the conference “allowed the students to see me in an industry role, not just as their teacher. And it helps them apply their learning and see what goes into an event of this scope.”

Marilley says there are hopes of expanding the blue shirt program next year. And Jakobsen is hopeful Niagara College will take part once again. “I’m thankful our college recognizes and supports the benefits of real-life experiences like this.”



The entire volunteer team



Part of the Niagara College crew: (back row) Shauna Singh, DeLauren Johnson, Madison Vine, Erica Danielsson, Raycine Smith, Janet Jakobsen; (front row) Rafael Aparicio, Sarah Singleton, Myelle Schwarz-Frederickson, Emily Dawson.

The students have their say

It taught me to be professional and boosted my confidence. It was a huge operation and every detail was planned. It was so fast-paced and I loved it. It really fostered my love of the industry.

—**Shauna Singh, third year, Bachelor of Applied Business-Hospitality Operations Management**

It’s hard to imagine the magnitude until you see it: The technology, lighting and decor was incredible. It was controlled chaos. I ran on adrenalin, but I loved it. I learned the importance of communication and being prepared for any scenario. It confirmed that I chose the right industry.

—**Madison Vine, one-year Event Management graduate program**

I was attracted to the free travel and being able to put the volunteer experience on my resume. To be part of such a huge conference is a rare opportunity. I made a lot of contacts with students from other schools and other industry professionals.

—**Myelle Schwarz-Frederickson, first year, Bachelor of Applied Business-Hospitality Operations Management**