



On Saturday, April 29th at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the delegates of the Booker T. Washington Model UN delegation gathered together at the foot of the dais in the legendary General Assembly Hall of the United Nations. Before them were 900 other delegates from across the country and around the world. All of our 46 delegates were being honored with the Secretary General's Award for their outstanding diplomatic and political work over the long weekend.

During those three days, our delegates, representing France, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia Spain, Thailand and Tunisia, had worked with all the other delegates on a diverse set of problems reflecting some of the most pressing issues of our time: Animal Testing, Disinformation, Mental Health after COVID and Systemic Racism in the Digital Age. They wrote, they read, they spoke, they persuaded, they canvassed, they negotiated. They took difficult positions. The delegates representing the Russian Federation, for example, in UNESCO, had to realistically defend Russia's position vis-a-vis misinformation in a hostile environment that, for some delegates from other schools, extended beyond the "model" aspect of the activity and into the tensions of real life. For their work defusing these tensions, the representatives of the Russian Federation were individually singled out for their work. But so was over half the Booker T. delegation. The Secretary General's Award bestowed at the very end of the conference was a recognition of the hard work of all of our delegates.

That hard work had commenced several months before the culminating conference. After a complicated referendum that made use, experimentally, of four different voting mechanisms, the delegates chose their own "curriculum" – most emphatically *not* to be planned by an authority figure in advance but created together through trial and error. The delegation then embarked on an in-depth study of the winning topic – the crisis in Venezuela.

With no safety nets, with virtually no background knowledge, facing enormous gaps in their awareness of the southern hemisphere, its regional and international histories and cultures; lacking an understanding of contemporary issues, economic theories, political theory and science; the delegates in their self-sufficient way began to tackle these insufficiencies together. They began to conduct their own research individually and in self-

organized groups and they published the results of their own study, voluntarily, every day in MS54 MUN's in-house newspaper, the Gazette.

In the Gazette, a pair of delegates wrote dueling commentaries on sections of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. For a critique of capitalism, some analyzed the entire Bernie Sanders Netflix series. To explore the horrors of Cold War-era communist totalitarianism, they watched, in sober silence, Rithy Panh's film about the Cambodian genocide, the *Missing Picture* and shared their own reflections on it in expressionistic poetry and in analytic prose.

As their facility with the geopolitical history of the twentieth century grew, they took in the geography, culture and politics of Latin America. There were articles about the political ideas of Simon Bolivar and Hugo Chavez. George W. Bush's second inaugural address and Hugo Chavez's speech in the General Assembly Hall. The poetry of Pablo Neruda, in particular, his *Canto General*. The songs of Victor Jara, murdered by the Pinochet junta after the 1973 coup in Chile negated the presidency of democratically elected Salvador Allende. The constitutions of Venezuela.

But there was also the present to contend with. In the end, there would be a debate about the legitimacy of the presidency of Nicolas Maduro. This took our delegation deep into treacherous territory – the nature of democracy, the role of elections in legitimizing leadership, the relationship between democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law. Taboo topics like the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections and their links to legitimacy crises were openly explored. Meanwhile, Peru was in crisis and Brazil experienced January 6th-like disorder after Bolsonaro was voted out. The delegates studied all these events daily by monitoring the English-language press but also the state media channels of Cuba and Venezuela. Delegates found that this topic demanded a harrowing search for the truth -- symbolized, for them, by the story of Wuilly Arteaga, the Venezuelan violinist who put himself in the crossfire during Maduro's 2018 crackdowns.

But to get to this truth was difficult. The "interim presidency" of Venezuela, led by Juan Guaido, backed by the Trump and Biden administrations, collapsed midway through the year forcing the debaters to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Whether the violent breakdown in Venezuelan society and the accompanying outflow of refugees were ultimately caused by the political-economy of Venezuelan socialism, corruption, the overreliance on oil, the poor leadership of Maduro himself or the massive US sanctions were questions that our delegates took personally. To learn about this together, they met every day, early, before school. They met at lunch. Many met after school. They discussed and debated in the hallways; over trays of school lunch; on the swings of the Annibal Aviles playground; on the seats of the M11.

They read academic papers. They analyzed propaganda on social media. They pored through reports on the economic effects of sanctions placed on South Africa, on Iraq and on Iran. They corresponded, in semi-secrecy, with an ordinary citizen of Caracas; having to read between the lines of her careful replies to their questions about state security and

anti-government protests. In doing this, they had to reach beyond what was safe. The eighth graders in particular had to develop their own voices after experiencing much of their sixth grade year, such a key year for human development, in the silence of Zoom and in the midst of small pods for their once-a-week in-person half-days at Booker T. They displayed great courage in doing this, often by confronting some of the greatest, unspoken fears that they had accumulated during that difficult time. The debate held at the end of this process, an intense, four-hour event, was remarkable for the manner by which both sides avoided the overwhelming power of propagandistic rhetoric in their quest for both the proper expression of the truth and for the truth itself. Their voices rang out as they keenly pursued both of these objectives.

In the long run, all of this work paid off in unexpected ways. One of these, the most obvious but possibly the least important, was the recognition they received before the dais in the General Assembly Hall. The return to this Hall was a true homecoming. The last time our delegates stood in the same exact spot had been four years before. Between then and now, four different delegations kept MS54 Model UN with its twenty years worth of traditions alive and, in this changed world, brought its commitment to communication, conflict resolution and scholarship back to new life

The members of Booker T.'s 2022-2023 Model UN Delegation were Abigail Jones, Adele Bourrel, Aiden Decatur, Alena Egan, Alexander Zhu, Anna Schaible, Calista Harrington, Camille Dillon, Caroline Gilman, Clarisa Dominguez, Costanza Chawla, Cyrus Rawley, Eliot Faith, Ella Zeitlin, Emma Lapidis, Evan Goodman, Ezra Caceres, Gabriel Pozndyakov, Gwyneth Mahase, Isaac Sprung, Isabel Cho, Jackie Harrington, Jordana Gomez, Layla Grollman, Leela Vos, Leo Vorel, Lola Mendez, Lucy Dahl, Lucy Waddell-Rodriguez, Nagely Peralta, Nari Gioia, Noura Ayoubide, Oliver Kleinhanzl, Penny Adamson, Quincy Hermann, Rachel Koontz, Sable Lesokhin, Sara Vichaidith, Shaad Branker, Sophia Noailles, Sophie Chung, Veronica Cote, Veronica Mollod, Vidhir Verma, William Blanco and Ziv Barel.

*MS54 Model UN's delegation is chosen afresh every year. The delegates are seventh and eighth graders recommended by the school's teachers and, as such, are representatives of the school community. In the fall of the year, teachers of math, science and humanities highlight the members of all their classes who they deem capable of taking on this special commitment. All of their students are considered and, as aggregated teacher interviews and nominations are the basis of selection, no other application is required.*