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# EXPLORING OUR LEGAL LEGACY AT CTY

by Jennifer Huang

**I**n first grade, I sat in class and watched on live TV as President Obama was sworn in. Slightly bored and completely unaware of what was going on, I watched as the crowd cheered and clapped after his every sentence. In fifth grade, when Obama was running for reelection, I watched the presidential debates, trying—and failing—to follow along as the candidates repeatedly cut each other off and argued what seemed to be the same point over and over. Last year, I saw the 2016 presidential election unfold, each new development a surprising move on the political chessboard. In the years between, every news story seemed to be saturated with political discourse and politicians harshly criticizing one another in eloquent speeches.

It's not that I've always been interested in politics. But growing up in a politically polarized world, I've become curious about the beliefs and values that divide and unite this country. It was this curiosity that led me to take Law and Politics in U.S. History at CTY. If politics is such a fundamental part of our society, it seemed logical to try to understand the system and the forces that shaped it.

## The Value of Debate

Initially, the amount of material we covered—Supreme Court decisions, politicians, laws—felt overwhelming. It seemed like politics was just an endless torrent of people arguing and court cases constantly being overturned and overruled. But during our first mock Supreme Court case, everything clicked. The class divided into three groups: judges, prosecutors, and defendants. For the next few hours, the prosecution and defense researched and built their respective cases, which dealt with searches and seizures in schools. As a mem-

ber of the judges group, I discussed the case with my fellow students and prepared questions to ask during trial. Since past cases had already established definitions and standards for appropriate school searches, our questions were intended to make the two sides show whether or not these previous standards should be upheld. This particular case dealt with a search and seizure at a high school, so we looked at past Supreme Court cases to learn about precedents regarding the rights and responsibilities of schools.

The entire experience was extremely exciting. It gave us the opportunity to apply the information we learned in class in a practical and engaging activity. More important, it helped me realize that every Supreme Court decision in our nation's history involved a complex issue, with plenty of arguments on both sides. Each decision was the culmination of different people coming together, debating, and making decisions for society that continue to affect our lives today. The mock trial reminded me that in the real world, debate and argument can impact the lives of millions of people.

## Open to Interpretation

We tried a second case, this one about religious symbols in government buildings. This case forced me to consider different aspects of controversial issues. For example, the separation of church and state is necessary to guarantee the freedom of religion, yet the President of the United States often takes the oath of office on the Bible. We learned that this is not unconstitutional since it is a tradition. But that raises more questions: What constitutes a tradition? How long does something have to be in place before it is considered a tradition?

## AT MY SCHOOL, TEACHERS TEND TO SHY AWAY FROM CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS, WHILE AT CTY, WE WERE ENCOURAGED TO DEBATE AND SHARE OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS.

There is constant debate about the Constitution and the amendments that shape our society.

A fundamental debate involves how we should interpret the Constitution. Originalists believe the best way is to interpret what the founding fathers meant and to act according to that. If we drift too far from what our founding fathers intended, we would simply be making up standards as we go. The non-originalist perspective is that the founding fathers intentionally wrote the Constitution to be vague, so future generations would apply the basic morals of the Constitution to the changing standards and ideas of society. For example, the Eighth Amendment forbids cruel and unusual punishment. But what is considered cruel and unusual? Many old forms of punishment, such as sentencing minors or the mentally disabled to death, are considered cruel today, so should we keep redefining what cruel and unusual means? Discussing such issues gave us a glimpse of some of the controversies in our justice system.

### History, Applied

In addition to mock Supreme Court cases, we held a mock impeachment trial, in which our current president was charged with obstruction of justice (regarding the firing of former FBI director James Comey) and violation of the Emoluments Clause (due to his accepting of foreign payments through his businesses). As expected, the case was controversial, but ultimately, the jury found the president

guilty of violating the Emoluments Clause. It was interesting to examine the charges that President Trump has been accused of and to explore the legitimacy of each charge.

We also listened to informative lectures. On one occasion, our class joined CTY's International Politics class for lectures by both their teacher and mine. Although both focused on the impeachment of world leaders, one gave a detailed history of the two presidents impeached in the U.S., while the other dealt with the recent impeachments of the presidents of South Korea and Brazil. This combined lecture highlighted differences and similarities between international and U.S. politics.

### The View from the Other Side

At my school, teachers tend to shy away from classroom discussions on controversial topics, while at CTY, we were encouraged to debate and share opposing viewpoints. Almost daily, we discussed and debated a wide range of topics. These frequent class discussions turned out to be the most memorable aspect of the course for me.

I've lived in the Bay Area my entire life. Like most people, my political beliefs and values have been largely influenced by the people and the community around me. The class gave me the opportunity to discuss issues with people who grew up in different environments and, as a result, have different views. At CTY, I learned that my opinion will never be more valid than someone else's.

It's not that the students completely accepted or agreed with every opinion presented. Class discussions tended to be rambunctiously loud, each person trying to express yet another opinion. But every opinion and viewpoint was heard, and we all respected that people had valid reasons for their opinions.

Historically, being able to civilly discuss new and different opinions has helped our country progress. An unwillingness to try to understand other perspectives is polarizing our country. That's why it's more important than ever to converse about and understand different perspectives. Law and Politics in U.S. History taught me a lot about the people and cases that made our country what it is today. But most of all, it helped me appreciate the importance of listening to and understanding perspectives other than my own. ■



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At Loyola Marymount University, CTY summer students celebrate the day.