

Girls. There were girls everywhere. I adjusted my appropriately lengthed capri pants and began to weave my way through the sea of pearls, flat ironed hair, PINK perfume and dresses of all shapes and sizes that blocked my path to the elevator.

No, this was not a beauty pageant or a Wellesley college recruitment event. This was Sunflower Girls State--a program that required neither beauty nor intelligence. Girls State is essentially a week long state government simulation hosted by a group of crotchety older women who call themselves the American Legion Auxiliary. The 300 girls are broken into groups of 15 girls who compose a "city." While I did get along with my fellow Kickapoo city mates, I had quite a few problems with the structure and mission of Sunflower Girls State.

The roommate

Out of 300 girls, there had to be at least one with whom I had something in common. My roommate was not that one.

On the first day, she informed me I was welcome to use any of her toiletries, but not her shampoo because it was saturated with red hair dye. I never used her shampoo, but neither did she. I was also welcome to her ample supply of "Chicken-flavored-crackers" and canned "EZ Cheez" which she would eat as she fell asleep.

My roommate and I did bond during those sacred ten minutes you share at sleepovers when lights are off but everyone's still lying awake. I learned about her dream of opening an auto body shop and her particular penchant for moonshine.

We are now facebook friends.

The praying

I sat down that first night with a plate heaping with grade-D chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and overcooked green beans. On autopilot, I swiped a bit of mashed potato from my plate, just to sample it. I noticed my counselor's steely gaze.

"Hannah," she said, shifting uncomfortably, "we um, pray before each meal. Just a sing-songy little Grace."

Of course, I was slightly mortified. I wiped the mashed potato residue off of my finger and politely sung thanks to the Lord for creating an apple tree or something.

Praying before each meal caused two problems: first, I struggled to thank the Lord for my scrambled eggs as opposed to the Washburn dining staff. Second, I struggled to not consume food before praying. That breadstick looked so inviting on Italian night, but I could not even take a nibble because I had not yet properly thanked the Lord for it. The other girls actually fought over who would lead grace at each meal.

I was just like, "I want to eat breadstick now."

The Chanting

Unless I am at Allen Fieldhouse while KU is annihilating, as a general rule I do not chant. Chanting is loud, mentally exhausting and straight up awkward.

But chant we did. As we walked in our “Madelines”--my city mates and I were instructed to travel in two straight, even rows--we muttered a variety of dull and inoffensive chants.

Other “cities,” however, had no such qualms with chanting.

Ear splitting choruses of “COMANCHE RUMBLE” and “A-A-A-R-A-P-P-A-H-O GO ARAPAHO” rippled throughout the Washburn black box theater every single morning.

I considered forming an anti-chanting union, but some old ladies stand with a clipboard every morning and make notes about the general spirit of our city. “Kickapoo” never won “City of the Day.”

Perhaps chanting would have been more bearable if there were other actual people on Washburn’s campus. Chanting is always more fun when it elicits strange looks from outsiders. Unfortunately, a statue of some voluptuous woman on Washburn’s quad was the closest we got to an actual human hearing our chants.

Brownback

Governor Sam Brownback literally told us he would take questions, but we should “stick to questions about leadership, not about policies.”

Good joke.

He was 13 feet away from me, and I had a captive audience of 300. Of course I was going to ask about his policies.

“How do you feel about funding fine arts in schools?” I inquired.

His various micro-expressions in that moment were priceless. Disgruntled, puzzled and nervous, he responded, “I love art. I love paintings, the Flint Hill Orchestra, all that stuff. I think if schools like the arts, they should do them.”

He then explained how funding should only go toward the core functions of government, and that private entities should fund arts in schools. Brownback also expressed that he really does not actually hate art.

After a little stumble there at the beginning, Brownback was able to pull off a coherent answer. I did not agree with it, but it was kind of funny to watch him be uncomfortable for a few seconds.

The next girl who raised her hand asked, “Can I have your autograph?”

The other speakers

Simple fact: I do not care about registering license plates. I have no particular

interest in investigating insurance fraud or maintaining public records.

However, the American Legion Auxiliary deemed it vital that we delve into every aspect of each state and local office in a series of three hour-long career panels. I fidgeted in my chair, wondering why I was willingly sitting in a chair listening to a “balance the budget” lecture. Also, the Shawnee county clerk did not speak the best English.

Based on principle, though, my largest qualm with the speakers was the cloying “Thank you” song we had to sing. It involved repeating “We thank you so much” about four times, then blowing a kiss to the speaker(s). On the first day, I snidely remarked how the song creators were abusing our femininity, only to see that every other girl in my city thought that blowing kisses was the most adorable thing under the sun.

Awkward.

But actually

Girls State wasn't all terrible. By the end of the week, I had new Facebook friends and Twitter followers. I had met Sam Brownback and chatted with Ron Estes, our Kansas State Treasurer. I had lounged in a multi-thousand dollar Supreme Court Justice leather chair. I got a cute fake corsage for being elected Sunflower Girls State state treasurer.

After I got home, I ate meals without praying, I did not chant, and I attended no public office lectures. I was surrounded by people whose political and religious beliefs were consistent with mine. But I am glad I attended Girls State. I even filled out a “Potential Returning Counselor” application.