

The Right Direction!

When I learned of the 2018 Department of Illinois Oratorical Contest 1st place winner I knew I had heard his name before, Patrick Kilcullen. Patrick's older brother, Thomas Kilcullen, won 1st place honors in the 2015 Department Oratorical Contest and he then went on to become a Citizen at Illinois Premier Boys State. Those two events instilled some goals in Thomas and he then went on for the next two years to volunteer as a City Counselor at Boys State.

While in his Citizen year at Boys State Thomas or "TJ" as he is better known, took 1st place in that Oratorical Contest as well, and 1st place in the Essay Contest. TJ's goal for that year was to be elected as Governor and to go on to Boys Nation. He did not attain, the Governors position and he lost his bid for Senator and Mayor, but that certainly didn't slow him down a bit. TJ was elected to both the City and County Clerk positions for which he spent tireless hours in preparation to submit complete and accurate minutes of those meetings strictly in accordance with the written guidelines. TJ also led his County's Lobbying and Quiz Bowl teams. These things and so much more, earned him the Staff Selection of "Model Citizen" and an invitation to Boys Nation. In total TJ won 4 scholarships and he maxed out at \$5,000 toward his college education. While at Boys Nation, TJ was particularly moved when he visited Arlington National Cemetery and the Viet Nam wall where he learned first-hand the cost of service our Nations heroes have paid so that we may remain a free Nation.

In the next two years, TJ has continued to serve at Boys State as a City Counselor and after his senior year in High School, TJ was offered and accepted an appointment to West Point where he is about to finish his sophomore year. Once in West Point, TJ instantly found some friends he met while at Boys Nation and who he considers to be friends for life. TJ will continue to serve as a City Counselor when his schedule permits. He is on the West Point Debate Team as well as a member of a Chess Club and, if West Point is selected this year, TJ may represent the US as a Student Ambassador in a student exchange program with France.

I had conversation with TJ and his mother to learn more about this young man and the family he comes from. TJ told me that his immediate plans are to graduate from West Point, receive his commission and be ready to serve wherever he is stationed. He has plans to enroll in Law School, continue to serve in the military and become a JAG lawyer. When asked if he had political aspirations TJ advised that was not a priority or part of his long-range plans, but down the road he might enjoy a position, perhaps on a local level, where he could contribute and serve his community; key word – serve. When asked if his time spent at Boys State as a Citizen was a "week that shapes a life time", TJ said that was a gross understatement. When asked what his number one take-away was, he stated it was self-confidence and the responsibility to serve as the legionnaires from Boys State have, and still continue to serve our Nation and the youth of our Nation. He told me that a life-lesson he learned at Boys State was understanding his own skill set and exploiting his strengths, not his desires.

As mentioned, when I heard the name Kilcullen I started to make inquiries followed by interviews, in the first statement I heard about the name Kilcullen, the question was asked -what made him choose that the path he is on? TJ responded by stating that he appreciated the values and patriotic spirit he felt from the Legion programs he experienced and wanted to continue down that road. In my interview with TJ, he stated that was a very accurate statement. In an exchange I had with his County Counselor, a most telling comment was "He is exceptional across just about every dimension."

It's rather obvious from my conversations with both his Mom and with TJ that his patriotism runs deep. TJ told me that a major influence in his life came early to him from one of his Grandfathers who proudly served in WWI and after, became a Police Officer and a Fireman; he served his country and he served community.

Finally, I asked TJ if his brother Patrick, who won 1st place honors at the Department Oratorical contest in his Freshman year had future plans for Boys State, he clearly told me that Patrick better enroll in Boys State or he'd kick his rear-end!

I wanted to share this "feel good" story with my Legion Family members because I believe this young American has taken the leads from the great programs of the American Legion and I for one am very proud to be a part of an organization that can influence and direct the path of such a dedicated young adult; he is now and destined to continue to be one outstanding American. What a future is in front of him! Isn't the path this young man is on exactly what we strive for with our programs?

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