

NO MORE ROOM FOR SELF-DOUBT

Accounts from the Women Who Went to NCCWSL in 2019

On Feminism

"I came upon the realization that it is not my place to judge other women because of their life choices. To have children, to wear something, to be married, to follow a loved one's career path—all of them are life choices that should not be gender issues and that are none of my business. If I dare to call myself a feminist, then, why am I restricting, in my thoughts, the liberty of other women to do as they please with their lives? After meeting wonderful women from all over the nation, I felt that both the space I was in and my mindset were becoming more non-judgmental and safe places to be in." Nicole Hsiao-Sánchez

On Mindfulness

"It is more difficult than one thinks, to overcome our inferiority complex. The Mindfulness Made Simple workshop session, offered by Lauren Going, instructed me in ways to transfer anxiety, pain, and negative thoughts into fuel to reach my goals." Verónica Olivera Vélez



Verónica Olivera Vélez, Victoria Carrillo Rivera and Nicole Hsiao-Sánchez

From May 29 - June 1, 2019, three women from Puerto Rico, sponsored by AAUW's San Juan branch, attended the National Conference for College Women Student Leaders (NCCWSL), at the University of Maryland. Verónica Olivera Vélez (a student at the University of Puerto Rico's Law School), Victoria Carrillo Rivera (a Film Major/Language Minor at Universidad de Sagrado Corazon), and Nicole Hsiao-Sánchez (a Chemistry Major at the University of Puerto Rico) bonded together, and discovered a community of women looking to learn, share, and empower themselves and each other. As Nicole says, "I couldn't help but feel the uplifting energy of thousands of us united for the same purpose. Some of them were mothers, wives, first generation college students, but all of us epitomized the greatness behind what we all are: strong and determined women."

Workshops offered at the conference targeted the learning objectives of leadership and professional development, activism, women's issues, identity and diversity. Participants took

workshops on public speaking, self defense and mindfulness, among other topics. They learned about, and from, many incredible women who inspired them. Verónica reflects, “As a law student, connecting with Ruth Bader Ginsburg [through watching RBG with a discussion afterwards], who not only broke the stereotypes of our judges in the Supreme Court, but expanded women's rights, made me reaffirm the profession I chose and helped me understand the magnitude of power that can be exercised with it.”

“NCCWSL taught me to value my voice and believe in my story. Michelle Curtis-Bailey, founder of Education on Purpose, told me: “Your story has value, so don't be afraid to share it because you don't know who'll gain strength and be inspired by it.” Being in an environment where women supported each other unconditionally and spoke about their truths in full honesty gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I want to live my life moving forward. It's taught me to believe in myself and to be honest with myself. Now, I make time to check if I'm where I want to be, and surely, I am. I'm living my truth everyday of my life. Empowerment is an incredible thing to unlock, so much so that I've begun to encourage women in my community to empower themselves with the knowledge that they need to live the life they want to pursue.”

Victoria Carrillo Rivera

“I decided to attend Empowerment Self-Defense, where I gained pivotal tools that not only provided me with basic self-defense knowledge, but also enlightened me with a feminist approach to set boundaries, increase awareness and live with assertiveness. From Nancy Hunter Denney's workshop, Public Speaking for Women by a Woman Who Speaks, I learned to present a speech fearlessly. Her words linger inside my head. “I didn't get up today to be average,” she said. Her words have become part of my everyday mindset. She taught me to have a daily reminder: trust your potential. If I do not believe in myself, how can I possibly expect the world to do so? She encouraged us to stop apologizing for being right. After Denney's workshop, I have no more room for self-doubt. In the wake of her talk, I realized the important role that gender plays in our personal perception, as women, of self-confidence.”

Nicole Hsiao-Sánchez

“As a Puerto Rican, I recognize that my country doesn't share the same benefits as other states, because of our colony nature. The Panel Session entitled *The Challenges of Affordable and Accessible Healthcare*, made me understand the different levels of discrimination, based on race, sexual preference and nationality, that a woman faces in the United States when demanding better healthcare. One of the featured speakers, Dr. Tererai Trent, a scholar, humanitarian and author, but also an African immigrant, black, single mother without a job, shared her experience of rejecting the legacy from the previous generations of women in her family. She said a few words that I will never forget. “The baton of the oppressed, abused and uneducated woman is bullshit.” After those days [at NCCWSL], nothing has been the same. It was a space to deconstruct and be reborn. As a feminist, I've always insisted on identifying what obstacles in my reality are defined by my sex. The truth is that I still have a lot to learn, and NCCWSL gave me the necessary tools for me to enhance my arguments and to expect better from myself.

Verónica Olivera Vélez

A very worthwhile project, the AAUW-San Juan Branch NCCWSL program faces an uncertain future, as we seek new leadership for this committee. After many years of facilitating such enriching experiences for young women, we are hoping someone will step forward to continue this rewarding program in 2020. It clearly made a difference to these women and, in the words of Verónica, “[Victoria and Nicole] are students, like me, Puerto Ricans, a little younger and very hard working. Seeing them gives me certainty that we are improving the quality of life of new generations of powerful women, and it gives me hope that one day inequality will have no face and no voice.”