

History Lessons in Nation's Capitol Impact CVEA's Youth Leader

By John Snelders



John Snelders displays his 'shoe'

In my hand, I have a shoe. It's normal in appearance, a little torn up but a shoe all the same. At first glance most people would not give a second thought to it. But this shoe means a lot to me! I bought these shoes at the beginning of my freshman year. Since then I have worn them through three ski and swim seasons as well as many days in high school. During this time they have traveled over 36,000 miles on a bus across Alaska. They have been in 16 different states and across western Canada. These shoes came commercial fishing with me in Dillingham, Alaska. I even had my first kiss in these shoes.

In the last few years these shoes have become a part of me. They are something my friends associate with me and now all of you will relate these otherwise inanimate objects to me. Why? Because you all now know their story.

Think of the shoe as one individual. It is common, today, to turn on the news and hear stories of tragedy, of atrocities, of devastating destruction, and of war. Sometimes the cause of these events is natural, other times man is to blame. But whatever the cause is, it is hard to hear, hard to swallow.

To protect ourselves emotionally, we build a wall to shield us from thinking about these events. One example is when we hear a number. A number that tells of lives lost. 3,000, 58,286, 400,000, 6,000,000. This is the number of people who died in specific events of our past; some more recent, some long ago, but right now they are just a number. A number is a very impersonal thing; that's why we use it to shield ourselves, and who can blame us? The realization of what truly happened would leave most of us depressed and broken hearted.

Every once in a while, however, it is important to look back, to learn, and to remember what you have seen so history doesn't repeat itself. This is what I saw.

58,286-That's the number of names engraved on the wall at the Vietnam Memorial.

I saw at first a wall full of names, and I don't know a single person. Next I saw a row of roses lining the bottom of the wall. It was Father's Day that day; I saw families and individuals, taking pictures of names, making impressions on paper, and crying.

Then I saw Veterans; these old men coming to pay respects to their fallen brethren. I was shocked. All I had ever thought about that wall is that it displayed the massive loss of life in war.

But these people, these families, these veterans of war showed me what each name meant; that each name had a story, that each name represented an individual.

6,000,000-Six million Jews had their lives taken away by the hell fire that was the holocaust.

I had read about the Final Solution in the history books, but when I visited the holocaust museum, my eyes were opened. My eyes were opened to the horrors of the holocaust, but more importantly, the museum became very personal for me.

Before I stepped into the elevator I could not have felt farther away from World War II. When inside, I felt closer with every step I took. I could relate to them. The person in my booklet became a part of me; it was a very real feeling, one that I can't describe.

4,000-That number represents how many shoes are in one room of the exhibit.

This room is alive. You can smell the rubber and leather. No other room is like this. I told the story of one of my shoes, but imagine hearing the stories of these shoes.

I saw women's shoes, men's shoes, dress shoes, fancy shoes, and baby shoes. Every pair belonged to a person, to an individual. Just think about that; I did when I was there.

There is a quote on the wall of the room that says, "We are



Above, a single bird rests on one of the headstones laid in memory at Arlington National Cemetary

Photo by Sharon Crisp

Top Left, Congressman Don Young allows John to sit at the helm during their meeting in Washington, D.C.

Left, John came upon a demonstration while visiting the Capitol

Photos courtesy Josh Roos

the shoes, we are the last witnesses. We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers from Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam. And because we are only made of fabric and leather, and not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the Hellfire.”

So far I have shared a lot of information that is heart heavy, and depressing. I want you to know that while this is a lot of what I learned about, this was the eye opener. With this heavy knowledge I acquired, a happier meaning also shown through; the worth of every individual.

400,000-The number of people buried in the national cemetery at Arlington. Four hundred thousand individuals; individuals that gave their life for their country.

The rows upon rows of headstones are mind-blowing because each individual stone is a person. Just like the names engraved on the wall, and each pair of shoes, each headstone is a memorial to the life that person led, the family they were a part of, the times they laughed, and the times they cried. Each stone is a monument to the life that individual gave up to serve their fellow beings.

Feelings of gratitude, not depression are what came with this realization.

Numbers are made up of individuals; individuals from our states, our counties, our towns and communities.

The worth of each individual is great and the power of what they can do is awesome.

I want to thank the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the Alaska Power Association, and Copper Valley Electric Association for helping to teach me these lessons. I appreciate the opportunity to go to DC; to see, learn, remember, and never forget.

If you would like more information on CVEA's Youth Leadership Programs, please contact Sharon Crisp at 822-5506, 835-7005 or email crisp@cvea.org. ■

John Snelders, a high school student from Valdez and a representative of Copper Valley Electric Association, was chosen as Alaska's representative on the 2013/2014 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's Youth Leadership Council. As a representative of the Council, he went to Washington, D.C. as part of National Youth Tour.

John attended many sites, and had a chance to meet with Alaska's Congressional Delegation; a highlight of the trip. He then had to write a speech describing how some of his experiences affected him. This article is the speech he wrote and gave to the Youth Leadership Council this summer.