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Discovering new freedom

Senior **Francesca Mathewes**, chosen as the 2016 Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference Representative from South Carolina, stands with **Channing Smith**, the Free Spirit Representative from Connecticut, in front of the U.S Capitol building in June 2016.



First Amendment is key to journalist's transformation

Francesca Mathewes

co-editor in chief

Crucial to our history. Coursing through our veins. Sewn into the fabric of everyday life in the United States of America. Freedom.

It's a word so near and dear to our star-spangled hearts, and we accept it without hesitation or any consideration for what this word means in the context of our rapidly developing and increasingly complex world. What it means to the individual. Particularly me -- an aspiring journalist and almost-18-year-old, on the verge of being given more freedom in my life than I've ever had before.

Over the summer I was granted the opportunity to explore this word -- freedom -- and discover just what it means to be "free."

This opportunity came in the form of the Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference in Washington, DC. I applied back in February, not really sure what my odds were of being the one student from South Carolina to be chosen as one of 51 representatives and scholarship winners at this conference.

Then came that unsuspecting April morning. I can't think of an email I've ever been more excited about receiving (granted,

they don't all begin with the word 'WINNER' in the subject line). I knew it was a big deal, receiving the award and the trip, but only on a surface level. I had no idea how much this experience would really affect me.

So starting from day one, the question was posed: Which First Amendment freedom do you believe is most important? Why? How do these freedoms -- speech, press, religion, petition and assembly -- guide our every day decisions, thoughts and actions?

From the journalist's point of view, the answers to these questions seem obvious. They guarantee us the right to expose the truth, express our thoughts, practice any faith, publish what you feel...they guarantee us the right to move freely. To allow the human experience to reach its full potential, and to explore what's right, what's wrong and what our thoughts are on our own existence and the world around us without hesitation.

But it's one thing to understand these things about freedom and another to really put this into practice. Not as a journalist, but as a person.

In the beginning of this conference, I didn't really understand why we were being called "Free Spirit Scholars." To me, "free spirit" was a term I'd use mockingly to talk about the inflated egos of pseudo-hipster white folks on Tumblr.

But as the week progressed, this term began to make more and more sense. I found myself connected with people from across the country in ways I never had before. What started out

as "Hi, nice to meet you," quickly turned into "Oh my god, you think that too?" and finally into, "I'll miss you so much."

I spoke with conviction, listened with open ears and an even more open heart. I frolicked around a city I've been to twice with people I'd only known for hours, and yet felt so at home. I never once felt like I had to censor my words for fear of judgement, or if I did, I simply didn't care. It was not a room full of snotty high schoolers -- it was a circle of kindred spirits. It was a connection of like souls. For the first time in a very, very long time I was just being me. I was truly free. And for that, I am forever grateful.

That was June. I'm back at school, back to my friends, and nothing really changed in those five days I was gone. But my attitude is different now. I wake up each day knowing exactly how limitless this world is. That taste of real freedom that I experienced -- it's achievable. That can be YOUR life, every single day, if you let it.

The First Amendment is freedom on paper. It tells us what we can do, but it's up to the individual to actually do it. To push everything aside and do what YOU want to do. Take the risks, make the leaps of faith. Let your guard down and walk into every experience with open arms, bright eyes and a full heart, and allow yourself to be wowed and changed by the results.

So, I'm thankful. Thankful for the 50 new friends I have, and the memories, inspiration and ideas they've given me, as well as the confidence to truly believe I can make this world my own.

There's still a lot to be learned. The future is still uncertain. But the future, while unknown, is bright -- because we have the power to make it that way. And that is freedom.

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