

4-1-2020

"Fearless" on Capital Hill

Kelley Bruss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Bruss, Kelley (2020) "'Fearless" on Capital Hill," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol63/iss1/13>

This Regular Feature is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.



Kenia Flores '20 stands with U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, for whom she interned in both Washington, D.C., and Charlotte, N.C.

Working the phones in a United States senator's office takes a certain resolve.

Kenia Flores '20 knows this well.

"Sometimes it's hard. People will yell at you," Flores says of fielding calls from constituents, an activity that took much of her time during a recent internship. But she believes every person has a right to be heard – those who voted for Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, for whom she interned, and those who didn't.

But Flores didn't mind the sometimes-demanding telephone conversations. Every time she walked into work at the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., her spirit was renewed.

"It's a feeling of awe and passion and inspiration," she says.

Flores recently completed her second internship for Tillis. In the summer of 2018, she worked in his district office in Charlotte, her hometown. Last summer

she spent a month in his Washington, D.C., office.

"This is where I belong. This is what I'm meant to do," she says.

Flores had her first taste of Washington as a high school senior when she traveled with the National Federation of the

Blind for the organization's annual advocacy seminar. She's been drawn to Capitol Hill ever since. While she doesn't think her future will focus exclusively on disability policy, "it definitely influences how I view other policy areas," she says. "It's

definitely given me a unique lens to see things."

Flores has been blind since birth and laughs as she reflects on what she just said.

Others notice her blindness first, but it's never their final impression, says her adviser, David Fleming, associate professor of politics and international affairs.

"She's fearless," he says. "I think she's exposed a lot of us, including me, to a lot of the possibilities and issues that people with disabilities face."

Flores, a class of 2020 Furman Fellow, who is majoring in politics and international affairs, plans to work for a few years after graduation before applying to law school.

Flores had her first extended stay in the nation's capital the spring semester of her sophomore year as part of Furman's Washington Experience. She interned then with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which administers and enforces anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.

'FEARLESS' ON CAPITOL HILL



A Furman Fellow finds meaning in the details.

BY KELLEY BRUSS

“This is where I belong.
This is what I’m meant to do.”

KENIA FLORES '20

Flores returned to North Carolina after that semester to intern in Tillis’ district office and fell in love with the work. Flores said state offices focus on casework, assisting constituents with everything from Social Security issues to expedited passports, while the D.C. office focuses on policy.

Elizabeth Edwards, regional director of constituent advocacy in the Charlotte office, calls her “phenomenal.”

“I really relied on her last year,” Edwards says.

When she learned Flores was applying for a second internship, she told the D.C. office, “We have to have her.”

Flores, who focused on education and immigration, attended hearings and briefings and worked with legislative correspondents to develop memos on legislative proposals.

As for advocacy opportunities, she took those as they came.

For instance, Flores introduced a social media specialist in Tillis’ office to “alt text,” the written descriptions that can be included with online images.

The staffer didn’t know about the option but shared it with a GOP social media group. Now other Senate offices are planning to use alt text in their social media.

“I just want it to be accessible for me and for other people,” Flores says. “It’s small details like that really matter to me.” ♦

TO SUPPORT SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES,
GO TO [FURMAN.EDU/GIVE](https://www.furman.edu/give).

NEXT



NEIL JAMERSON

Debates are divisive. Discussions are safe. Dialogues are neither.

And Furman is at the forefront of a dialogue initiative within liberal arts and sciences education.

In 2017 and 2018, Furman sent faculty and staff to the University of Michigan’s Intergroup Dialogue Institute. Michigan pioneered a curriculum in which students with different social identities – race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion ... you get it – learned to dialogue on contentious issues.

The goal of dialogue isn’t to argue a “right way” of thinking. Rather, it humanizes the divergent experiences that cause us to view the same subject differently. It teaches critical thinking, which results in either a change in position or better-informed positions. And as participants explore issues, the interrelation between cognitive and identity diversity comes out. For example, white people don’t have a monolithic opinion about gun control, female views on abortion vary, and so on.

Dialogue asks participants to draw upon personal experience. The inherent vulnerability requires bravery. All must participate. Those coming from privileged identities cannot merely observe so as not to place the burden of education solely on the marginalized. Yet, dialogue also respects the agency of all individuals to narrate their own stories.

The importance of dialogue is clear. A college education privileges those who possess it both economically and civically. To be empowered but unable

to dialogue across difference on issues impacting communities unnecessarily excludes important voices. If one has the power to make a decision that impacts others, I’d argue they have a right to a say. (Unless it’s my toddler.)

Within our campus community, graduating student data revealed that only 38% of students reported Furman had greatly developed their awareness of social problems, and 32% responded the same to whether Furman had prepared them to relate to people of different races, nations and religions. To fulfill The Furman Advantage’s promise to make real the citizenship promise of a liberal arts and sciences education, we needed (and continue to need) to improve. Dialogue is one method.

Post-Michigan, Furman launched its own dialogue initiative. Since 2018, courses have been taught on topics ranging from race to gender to political ideology. Outside the classroom, peer-facilitated workshops use dialogic techniques to cover topics like implicit bias, social identity and community engagement. Institutional Research is assessing the initiative in comparison to high-impact experiences like study away, internships and undergraduate research to add to a growing body of literature. Literature predominately focused on public flagship institutions. Until now. Er. Next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil Jamerson is assistant vice president for student development. ♦