



SPENCER HILL (Left) with Ryan Young in Washington, D.C. Above: the 'Liberty tree.'

Courtesy photo

Local students experience government first hand

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FARMINGTON—It's not often that a high school student gets to experience being a governor, mayor or other public figure and learn about how the government works first hand, but that is just part of the Utah Boys/Girls State experience.

"We got to hear from a lot of speakers like Rep. Rob Bishop, Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox and others," said Viewmont senior Nick Bell. "My favorite thing was a debate between the leaders of the state Republican and Democratic parties. It was nice to hear all the points of view and the quality information from different sources. It gave me an expanded view of stuff I knew before but I only had a small knowledge of."

The American Legion Boys State program is designed to develop leadership and promote civic responsibility. "It started in 1935," said Chuck Stephenson, secretary/treasurer for Boys State who also serves as State Commander for the American Legion in Utah. "It was really a program in response to Hitler's youth in Germany. It's open to high schoolers between their junior and senior year."

The weeklong event is held on the Weber State University campus. "They start on Monday and are put into cities where they elect a mayor and other leaders," Stephenson said.

"Throughout the week they elect county, state and national leaders. It's quite intense. They are required to write three essays that are graded. On Friday they graduate."

Davis High senior Carson Robb was elected governor while he was there this past June. "I had to run for office," he said. "My favorite part was getting to know the veterans in our community. It's hard for people especially my age to reach out to the older generation. It was great to hear about their service – that was the extraordinary part."

Robb said he's always been interested in government and politics. "It was helpful to learn the dos and don'ts of public service and meet public officials from the state of Utah."

His connection to veterans prompted him to raise funds and make a "liberty tree" in Kaysville. "It's dedicated to our founding fathers and those who risked their lives for my freedom," he said. "The idea came from my Boys State experience. I love those vets so much and I wanted to give back to those who protect my liberty."

Another Davis High student, Spencer Hill not only attended Boys State but was also selected as Boys Nation Senator and travelled to Washington, D.C. as well. "We got to meet the president and other representatives," he said. "It really gave me a fiery passion for getting an education in politics and government."

Girls State is run by the American Legion Auxiliary and has a similar mission, that of promoting civic responsibility and leadership among young women.

"It was a lot of fun," said Rachel Beal, who attends NUAMES. "The highlight was Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox's talk. He covered issues that were important to me like education and women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) careers. I went there considering becoming an attorney, judge or an engineer. I got to act as a city attorney in a mock trial and that was interesting. It helped me see the actuality of being a lawyer."

Online applications are generally available through Weber State at the first of the year, Stephenson said. "They'll be interviewed by local American Legion members," he said. "It's mostly an orientation so they will know what to expect. Then they'll be notified in April or May. It's fun to see how much they grow, learn and change from that first Monday to Friday when it ends."

The students received three college credits from Weber State for their attendance and several got full four-year scholarships. "I'm on track to have my associates degree before graduation," said Beal. "I want to go on for a bachelor's and I might join the military. I'm glad I went. It is a very supportive environment. I would encourage others to go."