

Writing Sample 1:

Blog post for the DC Public Charter School Board, June 22, 2023,

Reflections and Advice for the Future: Liv Birnstad

JUNE 22, 2023

DC PCSB spoke with Liv Birnstad, a recent Capital City Public Charter School graduate, in this scholar spotlight.

She's a 2023 Coca-Cola Scholar, the National Urban Debate League's Debater of the Year, a DC State Board of Education student representative, and on June 14, she became a Capital City Public Charter School graduate. This fall, she will attend the prestigious Harvard University. **Liv Birnstad** has received well-deserved recognition for her incredible accomplishments, from publications like Newsweek and Washington Blade alongside local leaders.

Still, she is a down-to-earth and humble young adult, with plenty of advice and lessons she is eager to take to heart, and impart to others. Read more below to learn about her dreams and ideas for the future—and how she was able to achieve so much at such a young age.

On being recognized for her accomplishments

When Birnstad first learned about her Coca-Cola scholarship award and honor from the National Urban Debate League, she was in disbelief. "I'll admit when I first got a few of these things I felt very 'imposter syndrome,'" Birnstad said. "It slowly became more real as accepting the awards and going to these places started happening. But I feel very grateful."

Birnstad explained how she finds many of her peers in spaces like the Coca-Cola scholarship program tend to be highly motivated and accomplished. "It's very easy to feel out of place in these settings, and so it was a little bit of an adjustment," she said.

On the future

Birnstad also acknowledged how her experience at Capital City PCS might impact her future. "My school, we all want to do well, and we're all here to support each other doing well," Birnstad said. "I'm attending Harvard in the fall and from what I've heard... there is a sense of competition there, which I'm a little bit nervous for."

Still, Birnstad is looking forward to her new journey. “I’m really excited for coaching debate while I’m in Massachusetts, which is going to be really, really fun because I get to meet a whole new group of debaters who live in Boston.” The scholar is set to coach several students and the travel team with the [National Association for Urban Debate Leagues](#)’ Boston group.

As for her studies, Birnstad is planning to major in English “or potentially Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies.” Her dream is to be a teacher. “It brings me a lot of joy, in kind of all of the small ways that I have explored teaching. Like I taught Tai Kwan Do, or coaching debate, or whatever that looks like. And so, I’m really excited to see how that plays in the classroom because some of my favorite people in the world have been my teachers... I dream to be like them.”

On advocacy

Recently, Birnstad was recognized for her role in planning DC’s first “[Pride Prom](#),” an inclusive and safe event for LGBTQ+ youth. The idea for the event first came into fruition a year ago, when working with Ward 2 State Board of Education Representative, [Allister Chang](#), on a grant proposal with Lady Gaga’s [Born this Way](#) Foundation.

“Obviously I’m interested in the mission of supporting queer youth in DC... So I was thinking through that lens obviously and the idea of pride prom came up because I know it’s been done in a lot of other places,” Birnstad continued.

However, the grant timeline did not coincide with ‘prom season.’ So, Birnstad and Chang tabled the topic until January.

“We started organizing with a bunch of other amazing organizers and advocates,” Birnstad said.

Alongside advocating for a space for her queer classmates and friends, Birnstad said she felt proud for her work pushing for student voices to be better heard in the State Board of Education’s procedures.

On finding a balance

When asked how she was able to manage her different responsibilities alongside stellar schoolwork, Birnstad said it was all due to her incredible passion.

Her commitments, such as working as a student representative with the State Board of Education, brought her joy and excitement. “It became something that allowed me to ‘nerd out’ exactly what I liked but be surrounded by people who were also interested in moving forward with the same goals,” Birnstad said.

Thus, “it’s really easy to feel motivated to do those things because I want to do them,” she admitted. “All the activities that I’m involved in... if I wasn’t engaged with them in this formal setting, I’d probably spend my free time engaging with them or learning about them somewhere else.”

Still, Birnstad said she found it a struggle at times to balance what she loves to do with her other everyday commitments.

“At the beginning of this year, I completely overloaded myself, I was like ‘I don’t know how I’m going to do this!’ And the answer to how I was going to do it was stopping some of the other things I was doing. And it’s a really tough pill to swallow.”

Birnstad said learning when and how to decline opportunities in order to focus on what is most important to her has been her greatest lesson this past year. “It doesn’t mean that I failed, it’s just that I recognize that I want to be able to do something really well... It feels so much better once you kind of just bite the bullet and say no,” she laughed.

Advice for Future Students

Still, Birnstad maintained that seeking opportunities, like applying to scholarships and programs, is vital.

“I would say just apply, you can say no if you don’t want to do it later, and they’ll just give the offer to someone else. But if you decide not to apply, you’re foreclosing yourself to the opportunity.”

She said many people have asked her in the past how to get into Harvard, or get scholarship opportunities like the Coca-Cola Scholars program.

“It’s not that you did one thing,” Birnstad said. “It’s that you engaged with things and those things helped you get other things. And so, I would encourage people that if they’re not really sure what they’re passionate about, to explore in smaller ways.”



Liv Birnstad graduated from Capital City Public Charter School in June. She was her class' Salutatorian and student speaker. Photo credit: Capital City PCS, via Instagram

Writing Sample 2:

Blog post for the DC Public Charter School Board, April 3, 2023,

OVERSIGHT

How ANCs Work with DC Public Charter Schools

APRIL 3, 2023

What are Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) and how do DC public charter schools work with them? How does DC PCSB work to keep ANCs informed and benefit students and their families? Read on to learn more about this important work.

The DC Public Charter School Board keeps Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) informed about the work in public charter schools through sharing information about proposed actions that impact their respective communities. ANCs are non-partisan, neighborhood bodies made up of locally-elected representatives. Each elected representative, called an ANC Commissioner, represents an area in their district, referred to as a Single Member District (SMD). SMDs are comprised of about 2,000 people, and commissioners are volunteers, who are often parents, community leaders, or concerned citizens. Across the city, there are 46 different ANCs that represent every neighborhood.

ANCs are designed to help the unique neighborhoods in each of DC's wards have their voices heard, and address concerns such as transportation, safety, zoning, historic preservation, and economic development. Several ANCs also have committees entirely dedicated to education.

ANCs are direct links between residents and the DC government. However, they do not always have a significant influence over the many complicated issues facing public education. Commissioners do their best to support the families in their area.

ANC1A, for example, has an Education, Youth and Family Committee. Former Commissioner for ANC 1A and Chair of the committee, Christine Miller, shared that one of the most valuable roles of an ANC is to be a bridge, acting as a source of information for constituents.

This includes ensuring “critical” programming and resources continue to be funded, disseminating notices about resources to critical populations, and listening to the diverse voices in their community.

“Most important [is] working to lift the voices of those in our community to make sure they are getting their needs met, not having to settle for what someone else thinks they need,” Miller said.

DC PCSB regularly works with ANCs, meeting with them regularly and alerting them of anything that may impact public charter school students in their neighborhood. DC PCSB's policy is to notify ANCs of any proposed actions 30 days before they are discussed in a public hearing or vote.

As a whole, ANC 1A is aware of the most pressing needs the community has, which it hopes to address. This involves creating a “robust” system of mental health care for students and increasing after-school programming opportunities, Miller said. There is a special emphasis on vulnerable populations, given many of the schools it serves provide adult and special education.

To learn more about which ANC represents your school district and DC PCSB's work with them, visit our new [ANC page](#).