

12 July 2017

My Experience at the 13th Annual ISSF

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This year, like almost every year, I decided to spend my summer vacation at a faraway destination. Except this time, I wouldn't just be a tourist: I would be representing the United States of America at the 13th annual International Student Science Fair (ISSF) in Busan, South Korea, a bustling port city with a rich and vibrant culture.

In the third week of June, I packed my suitcase and research poster, and drove down to the airport. There, I met my traveling companions: two fellow rising seniors and four IMSA staff members. After 14 hours on a plane, we would finally arrive at our destination: Busan. Upon arrival, we were greeted by students from the host school of ISSF 2017, the Korean Science Academy (KSA), a science magnet school affiliated with the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). We were herded onto a bus and made the short drive to KSA. When we arrived, my eyes probably widened, as the school was a sight to behold. Built in a region with geography that greatly differs from my native plains, the school is comfortably nestled between large hills. The facilities are modern and stylistically complement the school's innovative nature.

The day after our arrival, we got a closer look at KSA and toured the various buildings that constituted the school. I was most impressed by the Science Building (Changjo-gwan), which houses nine stories of laboratories equipped with the latest facilities and devices. It serves as a center for both students and professors to conduct on-campus research. As a student researcher with an appreciation for laboratory technology, I felt child-like delight when I saw the school's state-of-the-art technology, which includes a scanning electron microscope (SEM) and nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) instruments, all available for student use.

Something to note is that the ISSF experience encompasses so much more than just academics. I enjoyed the numerous cultural excursions that the organizers in South Korea planned - touring Busan, visiting museums, and eating traditional Korean food. One evening, students were even given the opportunity to don a hanbok, a traditional Korean garment worn during festivals and celebrations. Over the course of the week, we visited notable locations like the renowned Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, the Busan National Science Museum, the Korea Institute of Machinery and Materials, and the Korea Research Institute of Chemical Technology.

On most evenings, we attended performances by students from different countries that showcased their cultures. Some students sang, some danced, while others simply presented a PowerPoint about their nation. The hosts treated us to performances of janggu (Korean drums), buchaechum (fan dance), and a dance to K-Pop music. Watching students from the far corners of the globe proudly share a piece of their culture on a stage in front of their international peers was one of the highlights of the fair.

But of course, it wouldn't have been a student science fair without the research presentations. These provided an opportunity for students to share their research with peers and judges (staff

members representing the schools they're from). I was impressed by the quality of and the ingenuity behind many of the presentations. Though English wasn't the first language of most of the presenters, the curiosity and genuine passion for science that they possessed was clearly expressed. Many of the presented projects related to environmental sustainability and cutting-edge topics of science and technology; I have no doubt in my mind that some of those same presenters will go on to lead humanity in the future.

At the closing ceremony, everyone gathered to mark the official end of a very successful week. After some closing remarks from the principal of KSA, the awards for the research presentations were announced and I cheered for the accomplishments of all the friends I had made. I was happy to earn recognition for my own poster presentation. Towards the end of the ceremony, KSA's principal introduced the host of next year's ISSF, who would be none other than the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. It was truly an honor to be passed the torch of this amazing tradition that unites schools from across the globe.

That night, us students spent our last night together at a farewell dance party. Students made requests to the DJ so the songs that played were as diverse as the students rocking out to them: from Dutch artists to K-Pop to Future. I loved hearing the wide variety of music that students from other countries enjoy listening to. There were some familiar pieces, but I didn't recognize (or understand the lyrics to) many of the songs. My playlists expanded considerably following that night.

The fair was an amazing experience, but all good things must come to an end and all too soon, it was time to say goodbye. The next morning, we took our last pictures with the other teams, exchanged contact information, and watched as each delegation left for the airport. It was hard to believe that ISSF was over; though the fair had only lasted a week, it left me with many wonderful memories and I had made many new friends. I had enjoyed every moment I spent with the other students in South Korea, united by our shared interest in science. My favorite part of the fair was meeting students from around the world, many of whom I knew I would meet again in the future as friends and colleagues. I was sad to see it all end, but glad to have been a part of it.

Looking ahead, I am proud and excited to be hosting the 14th annual ISSF at IMSA next year because I now fully understand the potential that this fair has in changing a student's perspective of the world. There are so many brilliant young minds on this planet, and this fair is a unique and perfect opportunity for those minds to meet and for connections to form.