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## Mrs. Smith goes to Washington — reluctantly — and a skeptic is transformed into an ABC cheerleader

Posted on June 22nd, 2016 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I hate politics. I hate everything about it. I hate the positioning, the slippery maneuvering, the glad-handing and the lack of authenticity. I don't much like the candidates on either side of the aisle, either, and I especially hate all the name-calling and nastiness.

With this in mind I'm the last person you'd expect to see on a trip to Capitol Hill, right? This May, however, I found myself begrudgingly packing my bags and going, anyway. Duty called and, like it or not, Mrs. Smith (Kenton Smith, to be accurate) was going to Washington.

I have the pleasure of serving as chairwoman of the Recreational Boating Leadership Council's New Markets Committee, which focuses on attracting multicultural audiences to boating. Although I may abhor all things political, I love this assignment because I've championed the need for the industry to welcome new ethnicities for decades. Because the RBLC meets twice a year, including once during the American Boating Congress, and because my company, Freedom Boat Club, was sponsoring a lunch and our CEO was attending a 20 Group meeting, I was committed to attend. And so I slapped on my best political smile, made some appointments, prepared for my meetings and set off to conquer Congress.

Now that you fully understand my unabashedly negative perspective going into ABC, I hope you'll better appreciate the surprising outcomes I experienced.

The American Boating Congress was — get ready for this — amazing! Educational. Eye-opening. Dare I add, fun? Truly it was one of the most interesting and enlightening three days I've spent during my 36-year marine industry career.

First, the NMMA's Washington staff deserves a standing ovation. I've worked with many NMMA people over the years and typically find them to be hard-working, helpful and accommodating. As you might imagine, with my strong aversion to politics, the Washington bureau was never high on my list of places to visit. After I registered for ABC, however, I received a webinar invitation from that office, designed exclusively for ABC newbies. Being out of my comfort zone, I immediately signed up. The session was well organized and served as a fantastic primer. The content covered everything from the agenda to appropriate attire, an overview of the strategy workshops and some of the politically charged dos and don'ts during meetings with legislators.

Another bonus was the digital conference program book, a behemoth that addressed everything an ABC attendee needs to know — from legislative scorecards and bios to policy briefs. What a major undertaking that manual had to have been.

Although all of the pre-event communications were excellent, I must give extra kudos to the crew for its on-site organization. ABC ran like a well-oiled machine. From the registration to the social mixers, speakers, workshops, meals, coordination of congressional appointments, etc. the execution was flawless. As a seasoned event planner, I'm not easily impressed. However, I know firsthand the time, work and energy that goes on behind the scenes. ABC ranks among the top industry events I've attended over the years, and that's a very big list.

So what turned a political naysayer like myself into an ABC cheerleader?

First and foremost, I had an awakening — an epiphany, if you will. I realized just what I didn't know about important issues facing the boating industry. Although I keep my finger on the pulse of many things relevant to our marine marketplace, my own negativity toward politics had diverted me from many of the issues that can profoundly impact our world. Shame on me.

For example, I'd heard rumblings about ethanol, but knew nothing about the Renewable Fuel Standard.

Likewise, I was blissfully unaware of the spread of invasive species, how the industry is responding and what the federal and state agencies are doing.

I live in Florida, but I knew zilch about important waterway battles involving Biscayne National Park, along with other access issues surrounding marine sanctuary proposals and their impact on boating and fishing.

Nine issues were addressed in briefing workshops for those of us planning trips to the Hill. Besides those mentioned, sessions were held on trade policy in the Asia Pacific region, Europe and Cuba; deferred importation; recreational fishing's focus on reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens marine fisheries law; the Water Resources Reform & Development Act; marine industry workforce development and the shortage of qualified help, along with state-by-state issues. An assembly of experts tackled each of these items.

Another brilliant move involved organizing the 250 ABC attendees into small groups, paired with an experienced team captain. The goal was to help us plan our Hill meetings most effectively. I was fortunate to be assigned to Florida Group Four, with BoatUS's David Kennedy as our captain. A seasoned Washington insider for BoatUS who had worked the Hill previously in his role with the aerospace industry, David did a terrific job of preparing our team, then navigating us to both the House and Senate office buildings. This would have been intimidating to attempt on my own.

The meetings on the Hill were enlightening. We had been told not to be disappointed if we were relegated to meeting with senior staffers — especially since they are the folks who advise on the issues. We were also told not to be surprised if meetings were held in the hallway.

After passing through security (as stringent as at any airport), we met with staffer Emily Manning in the office of U.S. Rep. Curt Clawson, a Republican representing South Florida. At the Rayburn House Office Building, we met Jeremy Pederson, who works for U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, another Florida Republican. Because of the size of our respective groups, one meeting was jammed into a small office and another was conducted in the hallway. I was very impressed by how smart these young staffers were and how well versed they were on our issues. (And speaking of age, I've never seen as many sharp-looking, clean-cut, well-dressed young people in one place.)

When we visited the Russell Senate Office Building the next day, we scored big, snagging personal visits with our state's two U.S. senators, Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio. Both took ample time to chat with us. I was especially stoked to see the large, awesome sportfishing painting that dominated the wall of Rubio's personal conference room.

My only complaint about the entire ABC experience was that all of our meetings on the Hill were lumped together with other industry groups simultaneously. This came as a surprise to the groups, as we all showed up thinking it was just our group meeting. The size of the combined groups — at least those I attended — was a bit too big for comfort and meaningful dialogue. I hope the ABC crew can work on that next year.

Perhaps the most enjoyable event was the general session on the final day, where a series of speakers entertained and educated us on a variety of topics. CNN political analyst and commentator Paul Begala and Fox & Friends weekend co-host Tucker Carlson were funny and engaging and at the same time insightful about today's highly charged political landscape. Honestly, their keynote presentation alone was worth the cost of ABC admission.

Besides the NMMA Washington bureau and David Kennedy, I'm grateful for Boat-US's Margaret Podlich and NMDA executive director Nancy Cueroni for taking me under their wings. After the opening night social at the magnificent Carnegie Library, fellow columnist Michael Sciulla, a D.C. veteran, escorted me on a wonderful evening tour of the Washington sites, with dinner at the fabled Monocle.

It was a great opportunity to network and meet colleagues from all walks of the industry. Some come from large companies, others from small business. They all come to Washington for three days at considerable expense. They come because they clearly understand what is at stake and why their voices need to be heard. I applaud every industry representative who attends and encourage others to join the effort.

Next year's American Boating Congress is scheduled for May 15-17. I am looking forward to returning, and I promise to be more educated on the issues and much better prepared. Most of all, I hope to see you there!

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