

HOME NEWS

The day I met Bill Clinton for a chat about the world

Doing well in college exams has obvious benefits, such as good job prospects and personal satisfaction. But I would never have considered an opportunity to rub shoulders with statesmen and celebrities at a glitzy international summit as one of the perks of getting a first-class honours degree in chemistry.

Academic achievement was my passport to a weekend in which I mingled into the early hours with Bill Clinton, the former president of America, listened to Chuck Berry blast out a string of hits and got a unique insight into Bono's discomfort with his media image.

The event was the International Achievement Summit, hosted in Dublin last weekend by the American Academy of Achievement. The event is held in different countries each year, with the dual purpose of bestowing honours on the world's high achievers and introducing them to an audience of hand-picked students from around the world.

It was in January when I first knew that I was invited. The Royal College of Surgeons, where I am researching my PhD, had nominated me to the academy. That month I received a letter summoning me to the Four Seasons hotel in Dublin for the three-day conference.

All I knew was that the event would gather together students from around the world. The rest was secret.

The academy says its ethos is to inspire young people and that's the aim of the summit: to bring high achievers to meet young people, hoping it will inspire them. I had no idea of the calibre of the high

Student Clodagh Mulcahy tells Paul Colgan what it was like to rub shoulders with the famous at a secret Dublin summit

achievers who would be lecturing us last weekend.

The letter warned us to dress in business attire. So suitably smartened up, I drove to the hotel in Ballsbridge for the opening night of the conference 10 days ago.

I was astonished to see security guards and police patrolling the grounds. I was not allowed to park my car, and when I arrived at the door more security guards checked my passport.

At first I thought the security was bizarre until I remembered the organisers had said some very important people would be present. We weren't told to expect world-class VIPs, however.

Still oblivious to the celebrities in our midst, I was shown to the most luxurious room I have ever had the pleasure of staying in. I shared it with an American girl. It had a huge bathroom, with an array of soaps and shampoos so tempting that we took them with us when we checked out. The staff treated us like royalty, rushing to carry our bags and refusing to allow us to do anything for ourselves.

For all its extravagance they could have put us into a two-star hotel, as we spent so little time in our bedrooms over the following days.

The first night opened with a dramatic ceremony. First we were shown video footage of the famous people who had been to the summit before. Then came our speakers: Bono, Bill Clinton and Frank McCourt. Only then did it dawn on me that we were in the company of giants.

They each spoke for 15 minutes: McCourt spoke of his upbringing and how he became a famous writer. Clinton talked about Third World debt and Northern Ireland. Bono, who also spoke on Third World debt, said sometimes the media perceptions of him are wrong. He said people might think he meets the likes of Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin just for laughs, to hobnob with famous people — far from the truth.

I had not expected to get close up and personal with our esteemed guests. But we got to mingle and have lunch with them over the next few days.

I met Clinton. We talked about my research and he posed for the obligatory photograph with me. He stayed around the bar of the hotel until 3am, mingling with the students. I had to admire his stamina.

The late nights meant the organisers were taking no chances on tardy students not turning up for the 9am discussion forums. Each morning we were woken by an 8am alarm call that was repeated every 15 minutes. We were students, after all.

There were so many famous people there I can't remember them all. Often I didn't even realise I was chatting to an international figure until someone took me aside and whispered a famous name in my ear.



Bryan Meade

Joining the elite: Clodagh Mulcahy was chosen to meet Bill Clinton and other world leaders

One of the most enjoyable encounters was a lunch with Michael Phelps, the scientist who invented PET scanning. The ambassador to Estonia was also at the table. Phelps was a champion boxer before he became a famous scientist; boxing was his first love. He explained how his career was finished through injury.

I remember thinking he must have enormous drive to become a champion boxer and then go and invent PET scan — two huge

achievements that are such polar opposites. He was good company, too: friendly, chatty and down-to-earth.

Dinner at Dublin Castle was the highlight of the weekend. We students travelled in buses that sped across the city in less than five minutes, accompanied by a blaring police escort.

Bagpipers met us at the castle gate and led us to the four rooms where we were to dine. We had a five-course meal, with duck and

quail as the entree. Afterwards we were addressed by a roll-call of after-dinner speakers that could have been taken from pages of the international Who's Who.

Hamid Karzai, the head of the Afghan government, was first up, followed by George Mitchell, the former American senator, and Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state. Karzai talked about his search for Osama Bin Laden and his meetings with people who were in hiding.

The next day Mikhail Gorbachev, Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, John Hume and David Trimble gave talks at Trinity College. They spoke about globalisation, the interdependence of countries and economics. Coming from a science background, some of that stuff goes over my head, but this was fascinating.

On the final evening, the Saturday night, was the Golden Plate dinner, which was to precede the awards ceremony. The Irish and American national anthems kicked off the dinner, followed by an American flag-raising ceremony.

Berry, who was being honoured with an achievement award, took to the stage to bang out some of his old hits. Enya, the Irish singer, trooped up to collect her award, as did Karzai, Hume and Trimble.

I don't want to let down the organisers, but I don't see myself as a future world leader. It will be another three years before I finish my PhD, and I would like to stick with research after that, and to travel.

I have done well in my field, which granted me entry to this elite gathering in the first place. But rubbing shoulders with them brought home the fact that they are just ordinary people who have done extraordinary things. Being an ordinary person myself, that was encouraging.

Clodagh Mulcahy, 24, is studying for a PhD in chemistry at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, researching possible applications of platinum and ruthenium compounds in medicine, including the treatment of cancer and Alzheimer's disease