

Great Debates:

Saint Anselm Hosts Presidential Politics

Contributed by Chip Underhill



For a concentrated four months, Saint Anselm College embraced the political juggernaut known as the first-in-the-nation New Hampshire Presidential Primary. Chosen to host both the ABC News Democratic National Debate on December 9, 2015 and the Republican Debate on February 6, 2016, Saint Anselm and its New Hampshire Institute of Politics (NHIOP) were vaulted into a once-in-four-years experience that left the community thrilled, excited, exhausted and fulfilled.



During this 100th anniversary of the N.H. Primary, just about everyone who was anyone in United States politics visited the Hilltop. Presidential candidates routinely appeared on campus, sometimes with low impact (for example, to be interviewed via Videolink at the NHIOP with a remote reporter) and sometimes with a “you-can’t-miss-it” effect (a live production of *Morning Joe* on MSNBC engulfed the Coffee Shop one morning). In addition to live broadcasts by ABC of “Good Morning America” and “This Week with George Stephanopolous” surrounding the debates, FOX News broadcast live from The Upper Quad for much of the week leading up to the primary on February 9. They also created an elaborate studio in Davison Dining Hall. Cameras and microphones sprouted like flowers for a spring that was yet to come, even while seven inches of snow covered campus on the Friday before the GOP debate.

Beginning in July 2015, the NHIOP calendar cited 42 political events in 29 weeks. Sixteen major Republican presidential candidates and three major Democratic hopefuls all took part in a Saint Anselm event. The “Lesser-Known Candidates Forum” on January 19 extended a forum to 20 Democrat and nine Republican presidential candidates for their campaigns.

With all this activity even before the debates, Saint Anselm College more than earned its reputation as “the academic epicenter of the N.H. Primary,” a description coined by columnist Scott Lehigh of The Boston Globe. As ABC transformed the Carr Center into a debate hall and stationed behind-the-scenes staff next to the elliptical machines and treadmills of the Fitness Center, Sullivan Arena twice served as the press center for over 750 journalists ranging from CBS, NBC, CNN and The Associated Press to outlets from Japan, Norway, Russia and Zambia.

For the GOP debate, Google sponsored the media filing center and spin room where journalists could use broadcasting platforms to do one-on-one (or dozens-on-one) interviews with candidates and political experts. They turned Sullivan into a state-of-the-art technology hub with interactive video walls providing real-time data and thoroughly refreshed the press with a full café installation including specialty coffee drinks prepared by baristas at a temporary espresso bar.

Across campus, security was heightened to a level befitting a presidential campaign; Secret Service personnel escorted candidates, controlled entrances and exits, and swept buildings.

Giant illuminated 3-D hashtags from Twitter adorned the front of Alumni Hall. Faculty, staff and students and monks navigated around satellite trucks and parked where they could, all the while “Being Benedictine” by meeting the needs of our quadrennial guests. (See “It’s Personal” on page 24 for more insight into the care and feeding of national debates on campus.) When quiet returned on February 10, students had served in life-altering roles with candidates, the Democratic and Republican Parties, on-the-air and behind-the-scenes with local and major media—wherever they were needed.

Many, many college administrators and staff members worked hard to produce the debates and facilitate the media presence on campus; but the NHIOP and the Kevin Harrington Ambassador program excelled at delegating, including and leveraging the contributions of Saint Anselm students.

“This is what we do; this is why we’re here,” said **Neil Levesque**, Executive Director of the NHIOP. “Securing both debates was a challenge and an honor, giving us a responsibility we take very, very seriously. Students were critical to Saint Anselm rolling out the red carpet for candidates and the media. Thanks in large part to them,

a very supportive President and staff who worked virtually non-stop for three months, Saint Anselm and the N.H. Primary are nearly synonymous.”

Student “stand-ins” acted as candidates and media to help the TV networks calibrate lights and sound. “Runners” performed tasks from getting coffee to errands at the hardware store. “Flaggers” held signs aloft in the “Spin Room” to alert reporters of a political figure’s presence. At the NHIOP, greeters helped candidates get comfortable before TV interviews. Students served as ushers at the Debates and at NHIOP events such as “Politics and Eggs,” on and off-campus. They also worked on political campaigns and with major networks including NBC, CBS, ABC, WGBH and the Associated Press amongst others in downtown Manchester supporting coverage on Primary Night.

When the results were finally in, the 2016 primary recorded victories for Donald Trump (35.2% of the GOP vote) and Bernie Sanders (60% of the Democratic vote), with a record-breaking voter turnout over 60%. Such close-up exposure to this major political event inspired many Saint Anselm students who weren’t as engaged in politics prior to become more active and to vote, taking a shuttle from the Abbey Church to the polls. “It’s so active here and on campus, it’s hard to not pay attention. This is my first time making a real informed, intellectual voting decision. It feels very empowering,” said **Colleen Sears ’16**, a communication major working with NBC.

The End and a Beginning

It took a village to produce the debates and survive a primary. The experiences described above are among those of literally hundreds of students, faculty and staff who rocked the Saint Anselm primary world in 2016.

During prime debate season, “Saint Anselm College” and/or the “New Hampshire Institute of Politics” were referenced 8,108 times* in print and on-line newspapers, magazines and other news sources. In circulation and unique web visitors per month, the school on the Hilltop recorded a staggering “reach” of 18.3 billion.* That does not include countless hours of TV and radio broadcast news coverage.

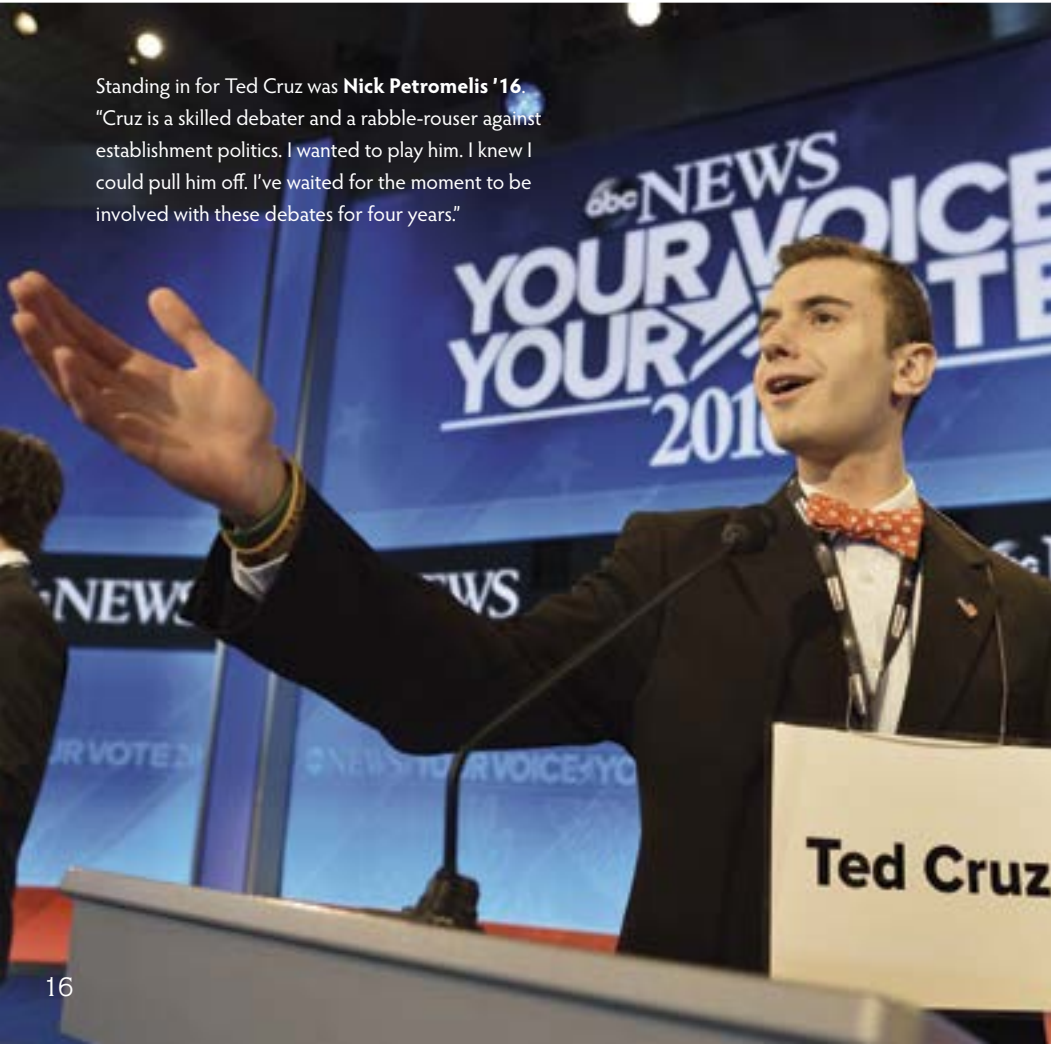
College president Dr. Steven R. DiSalvo underscores the importance of the primary to the Hilltop: “The opportunity to take part in the debates and to host the candidates and the national news media offers our students a unique education experience and a memory they will carry throughout their lives. There is no better way to learn about a process than to be a part of it.”

Part of the process, **Anna Boris ’19** enjoyed the experience but added “It’s sad. The campaign is moving on and I can’t go with them.” Still, in four years, Saint Anselm can expect a repeat of the primary season’s events, although as Neil Levesque points out “It’ll actually start up again in two years.” And in the meantime, the college and the NHIOP will continue the mission to engage the community and encourage civic engagement with the political process as it unfolds.

For students interested in “next time,” **Ashling Stanek ’17** offers words of advice. “Sleep whenever you can. Eat protein or carb bars and fruit to replace the energy you burn off. Drink LOTS of water but know where Starbucks is because people from outside New England will want it over Dunks (Dunkin Donuts). Be proactive; anticipate what needs to be done. Befriend security but most of all: have fun!”



Standing in for Ted Cruz was **Nick Petromelis '16**.
 "Cruz is a skilled debater and a rabble-rouser against establishment politics. I wanted to play him. I knew I could pull him off. I've waited for the moment to be involved with these debates for four years."



Supporters of Marco Rubio line Saint Anselm Drive on February 6.



Supporters of Hillary Clinton line Saint Anselm Drive on December 19.



The Fox News set in Davison Hall.



Abbott Mark Cooper, O.S.B., '71 and Msgr. William Fay of the Archdiocese of Boston check out the hall before showtime.



President DiSalvo welcomes our guests to the Hilltop.

“Working the debates was uniquely Saint A’s,” says Adams. “Where else could a woman from small-town New Hampshire be on the front lines of the primary and on a nationally televised debate stage? These debates were what made me choose Saint Anselm College in the winter of 2012. In 2016, 22 minutes before a first meeting with the Democratic National Committee, I finished my last final exam.”

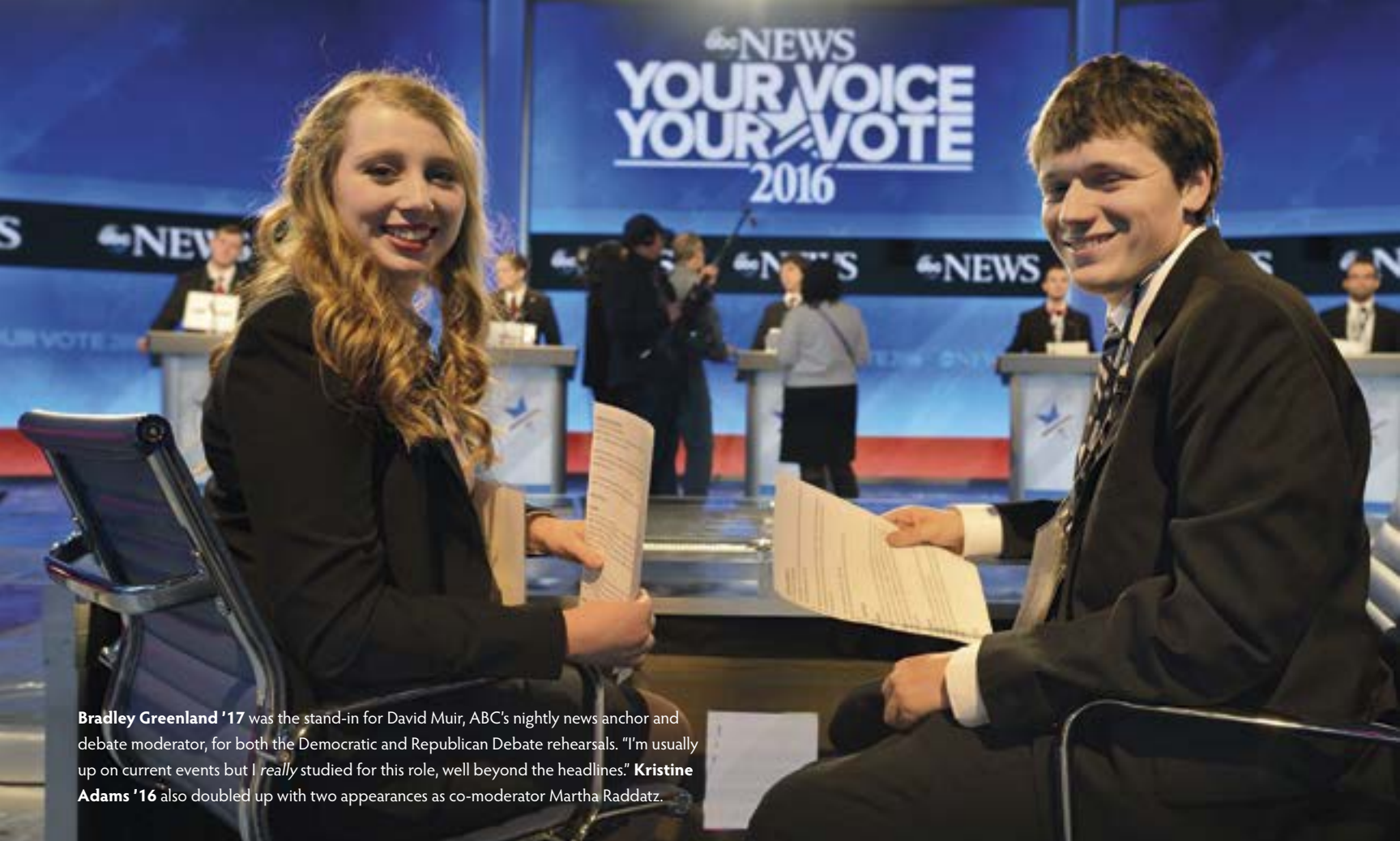
Twitter installed giant hashtag signs in front of Alumni Hall and the Carr Center for both debates.

#DemDebate abc

Hillary Clinton gives a thumbs up to the audience after the debate.



Hannah Gallucci '16 is Editor in Chief of the Saint Anselm Crier newspaper. “For someone interested in a journalism career, it was insightful. People were energized; you could tell they loved their jobs. That was inspiring. Watching professional journalists was probably the best part of the entire night. My staff and I were there for the experience of a live political news setting and getting stories for the Crier but I also helped College Communications get interviews with Tucker Carlson and Dr. and Mrs. Carson, something incredible I hadn’t expected.”



Bradley Greenland '17 was the stand-in for David Muir, ABC's nightly news anchor and debate moderator, for both the Democratic and Republican Debate rehearsals. "I'm usually up on current events but I *really* studied for this role, well beyond the headlines." **Kristine Adams '16** also doubled up with two appearances as co-moderator Martha Raddatz.



Republican candidates
Marco Rubio and Donald
Trump face off.



Communication major **Lauren Wanless '17** was a runner for NBC during the primary. "I want to work with media; this inside look into a news room operation showed me I might be a writer, reporter or producer. It taught me how to work under pressure, to be innovative and problem-solve quickly."



Professor Chris Galdieri is interviewed by WMUR's Josh McElveen



Martha Raddatz and David Muir moderated both the Democratic and Republican debates for ABC News.



Google turned Sullivan Arena into a state-of-the-art media filing center, spin room and café for the GOP debate in February.

For more photos, videos and news about the 2015/2016 Presidential Primary Debates at Saint Anselm, visit www.anselm.edu/debates2016.

abc NEWS



Neil Levesque works the crowd before the start of the GOP debate.



Saint Anselm students also served as TV's familiar faces in the ABC Analyst Booth and worked behind the scenes in production, including **Kelsey Walsh '17**, **Andrew Keyes '18**, **Brandon Pratte '18** (George Stephanopolous), and **Karen Ejiofor '16** (Donna Brazile) for the Democratic Debate.

ON THE *Air*, IN *Cyberspace* AND IN *Print*

Dozens of faculty and students were called upon by media for expertise and comment about everything from politics, economics, terrorism and voter behavior to "What's it like?" to be on campus during this time of Saint Anselm's life.

Faculty frequently in the news were Professors Christopher Galdieri and Dale Kuehne of the Department of Politics, as well as Neil Levesque of the NHOP.

At an off-campus town hall by the *Today* show, the first question from the audience was asked by **Karoline Leavitt '19**. Following up on *Today* was business major **Brian Pickowicz '16**. *Rolling Stone* magazine pictured **Sam Brandeis '18** in a two-page spread photo about candidate Martin O'Malley.

Freshman sociology major **Rebecca Rand** was thrust into the national media spotlight three times in 48 hours. "When asked by CBS, I'd never done a TV interview let alone for national television. It got crazier when I was invited to an interview later that day with NBC's Andrea Mitchell, but my favorite was on CNN's 'New Day.' It was so exciting having my hair and makeup done and having transportation to and from the scene. (The experiences taught me) to stay calm around celebrities and cameras (and to control) the pace and volume of my voice."

Ashley Pratte '11 is among alumni now in media who professionally returned to the Hilltop. "This was my first time back at Saint A's, on the job for LifeZette. It was really neat to be there as a journalist because I was a CNN runner in June 2007 as a soon-to-be freshman. I told all the news people in town from DC—friends of mine now—that I'm an alumna. Bret Baier (FOX) and Mark Preston (CNN) notably remarked that the campus is so incredibly beautiful and hospitable."