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

D

oing well in college exams has obvious ben

fits, 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 Ameri
can Academy of Achievement. The event is held in different coun

dies each year, with the dual pur

pose of bestowing honours on the world’s high achievers and intro

ducing 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 nomi

nated me to the academy. That month I received a letter summoning

me to the Four Seasons hotel in Dublin for the three-day con

ference.

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

an aim of the summit: to bring high achievers to meet young people,

hoping it will inspire them. I had no idea of the caliber of the high

achievers who would be lecturing us last weekend.

The letter warned us to dress in business attire. So suitably smart

ened up, I drove to the hotel in Ballsbridge for the opening night of the conference last week.

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 security guards checked my passport.

As I first 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 my 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 an

huge bathroom, with an array of soaps and shampoos so tempting

that we took some of them with us when we checked out. The staff treated us like royalty, rushing to carry our

bags and refusing to allow us 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 dra

matic 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. Mc

Court 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 at the bar of the hotel until

3am, mingling with the students. I had to admire his stamina.

The late nights meant the organis

ers 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 stu

dents, 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 fig

ure. Once someone took me aside and whispered a famous name in

my ear.

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 tremendous drive to become a

champion boxer and then go on and

invent PET scan — two huge

achievements that are such polar

opposites. He was good company,

too; friendly, chatty and down-to-

town.

Dinner at Dublin Castle was the

highlight of the weekend. We stu

dents travelled in buses that sped

across the city in less than five min

utes, 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 entrée. 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 peo

ple who were in hiding.

The next day Mikhail Gor

bachev, 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 fas

cinating.

On the final evening, the Satur

day 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. Eury, the Irish singer,
trooped up to collect her award, as
did Harry, O’Donoghue.

I don’t want to let down the

organisers, but I don’t see myself as

a future world leader. I have 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

grouping with them. But I just love

travelling to new places with

people who are just as ordinary people who have done

extraordinary things. Being an ordi

nary person myself, that was

encouraging.

Clodagh Mulcaddy, 24, is studying for a PhD in chemistry at the Royal

College of Surgeons in Ireland, researching possible applications of

platinum and ruthenium com

pounds in medicine, including the
treatment of cancer and Alzhe

imer’s disease.