

After I was notified I had been selected for the United States Senate Youth Program, I was contacted by one of the Illinois delegates from last year, Rustin Fakhri. We met up for lunch and he gave me advice about college, financial aid, and Washington Week— what to expect, what to bring, what to wear. "There's plenty of time to sleep when you get home," he told me, urging me to make the most of the week and push through sleep deprivation that was sure to ensue due to the rigorous schedule. I also recall him saying that Washington Week was a life-changing experience. I was undoubtedly excited for Washington Week, but part of me wondered if it was a bit hyperbolic to call it a "life-changing" experience. My skepticism would at least make Brian Lamb happy. But nothing Rustin could have said would have prepared me for the incomparable and wondrous experience of Washington Week.

When I arrived to the Washington Reagan airport I was greeted by one of the seventeen fine young men and women that would serve as our Military Mentors for the week. Throughout the week the Military Mentors helped keep the program running smoothly— keeping us on task and on time. But more importantly, they were truly mentors to us, offering their worldly wisdom, friendship, and advice. The Military Mentors were great examples of public service and dedication, strongly enhancing one of the core goals of the United States Senate Youth Program.

The schedule began in earnest on Sunday, making every day of the first half of the week feel like it was a day too soon. I remember commenting to some fellow delegates on Monday night that it already felt like Tuesday because we had already done so much. Looking at the agenda left me completely stunned at all of the stuff we still had to look forward to.

On Monday Ruth Ginsburg spoke with us at the U.S. Capitol. We found our seats in a room, barely big enough to contain the group. We waited in our seats in anticipation for a while. People joked how Justice Ginsburg might make her entrance. Some speculated that the giant portrait of John Marshall would spring open and Ginsburg would fly out from behind it; others claimed she would appear in the fireplace like in Harry Potter. Although her entrance wasn't as climactic as some had hoped, her presence and words were inspiring. And never forget, *Plessy v. Ferguson* happened in 1896, a date we "all should know," and Justice Ginsburg's favorite flavor of ice cream is pistachio.

But once we hit Wednesday, time felt like it was slipping through our fingers. Meeting Obama was certainly the pinnacle of the week, although perhaps only the North Star in the wide night sky of Washington Week. Obama was supercool and had a great sense of humor. At one point someone asked him where Joe was. Obama quips, "Joe the Vice President, or Joe the plumber?"

The speeches, policy addresses, history, art, architecture, and food we encountered throughout Washington Week were incredible. But it's the people that make Washington Week. Without the generous people at the Hearst Foundation, the hardworking USSYP staff and Military Mentors, and the talented and all-around amazing delegates, Washington Week would simply not be possible. Washington Week has forged strong friendships and left me with experiences that I am confident have changed my life. You can't say I wasn't warned.

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