

"I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we, too will be remembered not for our victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit."

Those words spoken by President John F. Kennedy sum up my experience during the United States Senate Youth Program's 47th Annual Washington Week. Of everything I learned during the unforgettable week in D.C., the lessons of altruism and the idea that our contributions to the betterment of humanity form our legacy are what will stick with me forever.

Day 1

On March 7, 104 students, two from each state, Washington, D.C., and students whose parents serve in the military overseas filed into the Colonial Room of the infamous Mayflower Hotel anxious to meet each other. Being one of those lucky 104 students, I felt nervous but excited. I began to talk with the students, recognizing some whom I had met on Facebook a month before, through the program's Facebook group. The first night concluded with the assignment of our Military Mentor, a member of the United States Armed Forces who would be our adult guide for the week, and the announcement of our roommates, mine a student from Arkansas.

Day 2

We visited the Holocaust Museum, a haunting, beautiful memorial to those lost in the Holocaust; the National Museum of American History; the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where I saw the original Shepard Farley portrait of Barack Obama, popularized during the 2008 presidential election, and an original Andy Warhol.

Day 3

March 9 was the start of the amazing bill of speakers we would be engaging with. We heard from Nancy Erickson, the Secretary of the Senate, Don Ritchie, the Associate Senate Historian, Sen. Thomas Carper, of Delaware, and most notably Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg of the Supreme Court. She, I must say, is the most magnificent woman in American government.

Day 4

We met with Sheila Bair, the Chairman of the FDIC, Michael Leiter, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who gave an honest description about the struggle between maintaining our country's security and preserving our citizens' civil liberties. We also toured the United States Senate and spoke with Sen. Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska.

Day 5

Wednesday, March 11, is a day I will never forget. It was the day I met President Barack Obama and shook his hand! President Obama took the time to speak with us all, as well as answer a few questions, take a group picture and personally shake every delegate's hand. If that wasn't enough for one day, I got to speak with Sen. Barbara Mikulski, of Maryland, another great woman in American politics, for about 30 minutes.

Day 6-8

The last three days consisted of meetings with Brian Lamb, the President and CEO of C-SPAN, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, and Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida, tours of the Newseum, Arlington National Cemetery and the Pentagon, and a performance by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center. The impressive museums, monuments and the even more remarkable speakers left me with inspiration to get out and make a difference, "to be my brother's keeper, to be my sister's keeper," as President Obama so often puts it.

Reflections

I will use the wisdom passed down to me by the leaders of our nation, both the leaders I met this week and the leaders I was only able to read about, as a guide when making decisions as leader, now and in the future.

As a student interested in studying political science and international relations, the United States Senate Youth Program helped to solidify my interest in those areas and encouraged me to take my interests even further by attending law school or some other kind of graduate program.

This experience provided me with more memories than I could fill a memoir with. I feel as though I must thank the Hearst Foundation for affording me this opportunity and setting a great example of philanthropy by funding this program.

I will take the spirit of altruism and the idea that our service to mankind is our legacy and share it with everyone I meet, in hopes of making a positive and small but permanent mark on this world. In the end, after the dust settles, I hope both my triumphs and failures pale in comparison to my contributions to the human spirit, for those contributions will form my legacy.

Nic Dahl - MD