

Dahkota Brown, CA – 2015

As my plane landed and the flight attendant welcomed us to sunny Sacramento, California, I couldn't help but get a bit emotional thinking of all the new friends and memories I had made during Washington Week for the United States Senate Youth Program. My parents picked me up from the airport and, much like Senator Cory Gardner, I passed out cold in the back seat while attempting to tell them of all my adventures. After staying up for hours upon hours the night before to see everybody off and hug my new friends goodbye, I ended up sleeping for about 15 hours. Once I had woken up and settled back in, I sat in the living room with my parents and just shared.

As I told them of my week in Washington with 103 other amazing youth they listened intently and couldn't get enough. I started at the beginning, telling them about my Military Mentor, Captain Deed Zeigler. He was born and raised in California and went to college just an hour and a half away from my hometown. I shared with them recollections of delegates and the other members of "Z-Squad," as we referred to ourselves. Walking them through my week, I told them about Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, and about the Newseum, which holds the antenna to the taller of the twin towers.

I moved onto the Monday through Friday, 6 AM to 11 PM, most eventful week of my life. The words of Judge Robert Henry of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals spewed out of my mouth in excitement, trying to tell them everything; "It'd be nice if we could all love each other, but that'll never happen. We have to learn to love the law." I spoke highly of both Julie Adams, the Secretary of Senate, and Elizabeth MacDonough, the Parliamentarian of the Senate and probably the most important person in Congress. I told them of the Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps which provided us with music on Monday night before Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia spoke to us. Senator Manchin inspired, not only myself, but I'm sure most of the 104 students, to continue living a life of service. As a man of the people, he ensured us that "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Moving on to Tuesday, I told them about the eccentric and energetic Administrator of NASA, Charles Bolden. Hearing how passionate Administrator Bolden was about his work and learning how much he loved his job ensured that whatever profession I go into, it has to be something I enjoy doing every day. With the excitement of NASA still in my mind I moved right into our tour of the Department of State's Diplomatic Reception Rooms. I moved from one room to the next, even commenting on the elegant restroom area, and finally got to the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room. It was in this room that I would have the distinct honor of giving appreciation remarks to Mr. Christopher Painter, Coordinator for Cyber Issues of the Department of State. Ben and I talked with Mr. Painter at lunch and he told us all about his job, protecting the Internet, and even "Tech Prom," an event he was attending that evening. I quickly shifted gears from the Internet and hackers to the World Bank with Dr. Jim Yong Kim and Jay Heimbach who explained their roles helping countries around the world to end poverty. Dinner that night was a completely new experience. Not only was I eating next to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives, but the meal was nothing I had ever eaten before; shrimp and grits, southern cuisine, and ended with what most presumed to be an actual peach, but was really bread pudding... I think? To top it all off, we heard from Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia, who gave the six keys to life.

Wednesday turned out to be quite exciting, as my parents learned. We begin the day with Major Garrett, the Chief White House Correspondent with CBS News. Hearing him speak of his experiences in the business and working his way up was inspiring and made me think twice about journalism as a career, or possibly just a hobby. Later that day, we returned to the Kennedy Caucus Room, where we had heard Secretary Adams and Parliamentarian MacDonough speak earlier that week. As we piled in the room we were given specific directions to stay on the right side of the room. As our senators came in, the Military Mentors would pull us and our other state delegate from the bullpen to meet them. I stood there for two hours, watching senators come and go, wishing desperately to speak to them; Senator Jon Tester, who sits on the Committee of Indian Affairs, Senator Elizabeth Warren, USSYP's sweetheart it seemed like, and of course Senator Al Franken, Mr. Stuart Smalley himself, the man who called Rush Limbaugh a "Big Fat Idiot." Eventually seven o'clock came and neither of the California senators had come to the reception. It was a bit disappointing, but Jakub, our amazing photographer, made up for it by having all the senator-less delegates pose for a picture together. That night's informal dinner was filled with dancing, laughter, and mostly bonding.

My parents couldn't get enough at this point and were excited to hear of Thursday and its exciting adventures. I told them about the Vin Diesel look-alike who told us about his career as the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Secretary Jeh Johnson told us all about his job as Secretary, showed his Metro pass, and even showed us his Presidential Line of Succession Card. After Secretary Johnson was through, and a quick tour of the Lincoln Memorial and Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we headed to the White House. Long security lines, metal detectors, and even k9 units were all obstacles keeping us from the one place we had all dreamed of entering, but after about an hour everybody made it through security and we were on to what most would consider the best part of the week. 104 students, 17 Military Mentors, staff and funders were all ushered to the East Room of the White House to wait for the arrival of the President of the United States. You could cut the tension with a knife as students and staff alike held their breath, waiting for the leader of the free world to enter. As he walked down the corridor to the students, smiling and waving, a small buzz of chatter overcame the crowd. The President of the United States of America was standing right in front of me and we were all silent. To break the tension, President Obama casually just said, "What's up guys?" and the whole place lost it with laughter. The President spoke to us for about 45 minutes, taking three questions and posing for a picture with us (I'm two rows right behind him, if you're still looking for me). The night was finished amazingly beautiful pieces performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, however, in all honesty, I did nod off a couple times at the beginning. I justified my falling asleep by catching some of the Military Mentors who had shut their eyes for longer than just a blink.

Hours into my story telling, my parents were ready for me to finish. Our last day of events and fun was beyond amazing. After appearing on C-SPAN, going to Arlington National Cemetery, and touring the Pentagon, all lifelong dreams, we arrived at the Supreme Court of the United States of America. The two California delegates were pulled aside by staff and taken to the Lawyers' Lounge, where we'd have the honor of privately meeting with Associate Justice Stephen Breyer before he spoke to the other delegates. As someone who has had dreams of someday working in the Supreme Court, the experience was exhilarating and beyond amazing. Ben and I took pictures with Justice Breyer and spoke for about 15 minutes before returning with the other delegates. That evening, after receiving our own flags, flown over the United States Capitol, and hearing absolutely amazing farewell speeches by our fellow delegates, we danced, sang, cried, laughed, hugged, and bonded. Many of us just stayed awake all through the night in the lobby, waiting for our shuttles to take us to the airport. After a seven hour flight of reminiscing, the plane landed and the flight attendant welcomed us to sunny Sacramento, California.