

Matthew Keating, MD - 2015

Looking back, my week in Washington, D.C did not feel at all like only 6 days in our nation's capital. How could it? Washington Week for me was a conglomerate of life changing and inspirational experiences that I will remember forever. Such an intense observation of government at the highest level not only excited me, but at times, even overwhelmed me. Looking at the schedule on that first Saturday, I thought each day would be easily manageable, but boy, was I wrong. Each day of the program taught me something different, changed my perspective, and challenged my beliefs. It was utterly exhausting, but so worth it.

Throughout the program I had the opportunity to debate and discuss contemporary political issues at a level I had never seen in my high school or community. USSYP was a breath of fresh air; I was surrounded by smart, wonky teens who could debate the merits of chaining the Consumer Price Index to Social Security benefits. The level of dialogue that took place in "the pit" of the Mezzanine lounge every night more closely resembled CNN's Crossfire than a high school debate tournament. I can honestly say I learned as much as I did from my fellow delegates as I did from the speakers. The experience was humbling, I was surrounded by winners of international science fairs and teens honored by the White House as "Champions of Change." My roommate Austin exposed me to his libertarian approach to politics and we had very cordial debates about the role of government. It might sound weird to say, but even as a Democrat, I found these hotel room debates a breath of fresh air from Maryland's liberal bubble - an opportunity to share my perspective and beliefs but also to hear a from contrary perspective.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't reflect on the speakers and lectures we attended. As someone interested in pursuing a career in international affairs, our Tuesday itinerary was one of dreams. Visiting the State Department headquarters in Foggy Bottom, touring the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, and having lunch with a staffer from the Bureau of European Affairs, solidified my desire to dedicate my life to public service for the betterment of my country and the world through diplomacy. Halfway through lunch, I thought to myself, "How could this day possibly get any better?" Then I remembered we still had a meeting with the president of the World Bank and dinner at the National Archives. It was truly an "only at USSYP" day.

The single most defining experience of Washington Week for me was our trip to the White House. As someone who has spent hundreds of hours volunteering for the Obama campaign and his post campaign advocacy organization, I have been dying to meet the man himself. I was so incredibly lucky to have been selected by the President to ask a question. I was 1 out of 104 delegates in the room. My question was: "In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing my generation and what can your generation along with ours do to address them?". President Obama spent a whole 10 minutes addressing my question; speaking on issues like income inequality, intolerance towards minorities, climate change, and partisanship.

Washington Week left me with an indelible desire to go into public service. How this desire will exactly manifest itself in the future - I do not know. The delegates and speakers made me realize first hand that the future of this country is in good hands, as long as our actions "strive for public service and not self service", as Senator Manchin (D-WV) said. I am so incredibly proud to call myself a member of the 2015 United State Senate Youth Program, and I am forever indebted to the Heart Foundations and the United States Senate for this experience.