

Gerald Fraas, SD - 2015

Before Washington Week, I'd never been to Washington, D.C. My understanding of the city itself was limited to what I'd read in books and seen in photographs. To actually see the city, whose discourse divides and unites our nation, whose policies affect millions, whose existence serves as a testament to the freedoms of our great nation, was an astonishing experience. But simply seeing Washington, D.C. isn't much to brag about. Experiencing the city and numerous facets of our government, in the company of some of the brightest young minds in our nation, is something that'll remain in my memory for the rest of my life.

"It's going to be the best week of your life!" seemed like a very cliché statement, until I actually experienced Washington Week. Setting foot in the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel, in all of its grandeur, and hearing high schoolers have intelligent discussion on major issues facing our nation, set the tone of the program. Coming from the great state of South Dakota, where such discourse is rare and hard to come by, I immediately dove in, unaware of just how much more Washington Week would be. The next day would serve as a sudden awakening. My interest in history and public policy were being piqued, and I had no intention of letting any of the program go to waste.

As we toured Mt. Vernon on Sunday, a quote from George Washington stood out to me, it being entirely relevant to the USSYP program: "A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?"

The speakers we'd heard from, be they Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams, or President of the World Bank Dr. Jim Yong Kim, all brought forth a certain passion for their work. The immense pool of knowledge we were exposed to, through these speakers with their inside perspectives and hands-on experience, was beyond anything that I'd ever dreamed of experiencing and was truly inspiring. And then, to be able to turn to another delegate, and have a civil conversation about the issues we had heard discussed that day, left me confident that the future of our nation is truly in good hands.

There's no way to describe the feeling of being inside the White House and seeing the president of the United States, the leader of the free world, walking towards you. There's no way to describe the excitement of meeting both of your Senators, together, and having them both be excited to meet you. There's no way to describe what it's like to hear a Supreme Court justice crack a joke about public policy. So, when people ask me how I'd describe Washington Week, I respond "indescribable." You'd have to have been there to understand just how intense, inspiring, and priceless the whole experience was. Thank you to the William Randolph Hearst Foundations for funding a week that I truly believe has influenced the rest of my life.