

Mara Matovich, WI – 2015

I sat in a window seat on my flight into Washington, D.C. and peered out to the city below to get a glimpse of the Pentagon, not knowing that by the end of Washington Week I would have gotten a complete tour of the building. My expectations were placed extremely high for the week, but I was unaware they would be greatly exceeded.

Our first guest speaker of the week was former Chief Judge Robert H. Henry, who set the bar for the exciting events to come. He explained that in order for individuals to befriend someone, it helps to share a common purpose; two people are able to become great friends even with great differences. All 104 delegates shared a common purpose – the United States Senate Youth Program. While we might have been an extremely diverse group, we came together for one week to experience a life changing and thought provoking program.

Besides the fact that we represented every demographic group possible, we bonded quickly as if we were the same, making the transition from acquaintances to friends in just a few short days. Our discussions ranged from the obvious of politics to the common small talk about our hometowns and schools. When we were not talking, though, we were listening. As speakers took the stage, our eyes glued to them and our notebooks at the same time, shifting between writing and watching, hanging on every word they said. Numerous quotable moments and bits of untapped insights flowed onto the pages of our notebooks and became the main source for documenting these once in a lifetime moments. I was enthralled with such new perspectives on the government, from the likes of Senator Joe Manchin III to Dr. Jim Yong Kim, but I also learned many life lessons that can be used outside the political arena.

Three key life lessons that I have taken away from the program: challenge, respect and love others regardless of who they are as an individual. Politics have sadly become the blame game as Senator Joe Manchin III put it best. As a society we need to help ourselves, yet we also need to positively help one another rather than beat each other down. While politics may be polarized by nature, each delegate reminded me that there are individuals in today's youth who understand that opinions from both parties can be put together for compromise and bipartisanship.

I tend to be pessimistic, like most of the American public, but when I am passionate I become optimistic. As cliché as it sounds, meeting the president was the push that put the puzzle pieces together. Every doubt I ever had in our government fizzled into nothing as President Obama entered the room and my mind focused on the amount of power, success and presence that stood before us. President Obama held the room with great wisdom and poise, but what I remember most was his mention of those with type A personalities, explaining that we need to slow down. He laughed, reflecting on himself and realizing we would not take his suggestion, but attempted to encourage us anyway. I considered his advice, but quickly remembered that I plan to make a positive difference someday and I am just getting started, soaking in every opportunity thrown my way.