

Anna Cunningham, AR – 2016

When my high school counselor handed me the USSYP application, I did not think that I had a ghost of a chance at being chosen. Little did I know that the application I held in my hand was the first step in the experience of a lifetime. Words fall sadly short in doing justice regarding my time in Washington, D.C. Washington Week gave me the encouragement and confidence to step into the next chapter of my life with a strong sense of purpose. It is the lifelong friends, however, who have made an indelible imprint on my heart and who inspire me to live a life of service.

Not every teenager can say that they received advice, anecdotes, and knowledge from the president of the United States, an associate justice of the Supreme Court, senators, and other esteemed public servants and journalists. My fellow delegates and I are privileged to have been in the presence of so many important public figures. Not only did we get to actually be in the presence of many esteemed public servants, but they generously listened to and answered our questions. I most enjoyed listening to the inspiring words of the Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams, and the Parliamentarian of the Senate Elizabeth MacDonough. As a woman with aspirations in the fields of law and public service, both women motivated me with their life stories. I had the privilege of asking Ms. MacDonough about her experience at law school, and it encouraged me to hear about how much she loved it. Her account of her law school days cemented my plans to attend law school upon completion of my undergraduate degree. The inspiration that I received from these leaders during the United States Senate Youth Program is matchless.

Every morning of Washington Week, I woke up excitedly anticipating that day's speakers. Perhaps the most fascinating people I met during the week were the 103 delegates that soon became my family. From the moment I arrived I instantly felt comfortable and at home. Whether we were discussing politics, complaining about the seemingly endless college admissions process, walking up the White House steps, eating a gourmet meal in the National Archives, or simply sharing hilarious stories, we truly related to each other on so many levels. The camaraderie of the group is very much alive even weeks after Washington Week. At least once a day, I'll receive a message from a Senate Youth friend. The memories of Washington Week are priceless because of the people who share them with me.

On our last night of Washington Week, we made a pact to stay up all night since we knew that our time together was about to end. We laughed, talked, sang, and danced the entire night. When the time came to actually gather my bags and walk out the doors of the Mayflower Hotel, I sobbed as never before. The tears continued as I rode the charter bus to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and went through security. When I sat in my seat on the plane, the man next to me asked me what happened. Through the blur of tears I told him, "I just spent a week with the most amazing people I've ever known and I'll miss them for the rest of my life."