

Zena Meyer, CA – 2016

Scenes from Washington Week: Miss Meyer Goes To Washington

With a spare moment, I grab my phone, procrastinating before doing some homework. I notice a new voicemail, from a number I don't recognize—but it's a number with a Sacramento area code. Plugging in my ear buds, I walk out into the hall to hear the message. The state superintendent of Public Instruction, who normally doesn't call me, had left a message that I'd been selected for the United States Senate Youth Program. With complete shock, amazement, and gratitude, I start jumping up and down while silently screaming.

It's a flurry of activity in the Kennedy Caucus Room. I'm sitting with some friends from Alabama, Arkansas, Alaska, and Arizona. A week ago, I didn't even know anyone from these states, but now they're my best friends. We're munching on some fancy toast and tapenade combo. (At this point, I've gotten used to the fact that though I can't identify like half of the foods that Hearst feeds us, I know it will be really good.) Then, a booming voice comes on: "And Senator Dianne Feinstein, from California!" Silence breaks out in the room; our conversations — about everything from the Supreme Court to what we had for supper — stop. Claps erupt as she walks in.

Wait, my Senator? The one whom I cited as an inspiration for my USSYP essay? Wait, after those countless emails I sent to her office *she's* here? The one I'd been nagging to come, hoping that she'd find the time for us? Emily (my fellow California delegate) and I stand, knowing this is our cue. We run to the greeting site. With complete shock, amazement, and gratitude, I start jumping up and down while silently screaming as Senator Feinstein enters. Major Mabis, one of the military mentors, grabs me. "Act like you belong," he enjoins, winking. Senator Feinstein was incredibly encouraging and warm, and, unlike most people, was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about her drought relief bill.

At the State Department, we're in awe over the beautiful room, gilded with gold, decorated with portraits of Founding Fathers. As we dine with State Department officials, I realize that my diverse interests—climate change, international relations, public health—could become a career. Since then, the State Department official I met has helped me contact various leaders in these fields and given me advice on how to pursue a career in this field. It was such an inspirational and memorable time. I am so grateful that as a high school student, I was able to build connections that many college graduates cannot.

We're at the Kennedy Center. I'm sitting with my friends from Maine, New York, and Pennsylvania. I'm trying not to stuff my face into some incredibly delicious chocolate cake. We're laughing as a voice pipes up, "Don't Washington University St. Louis' acceptances come out today?" Those who applied for admission there reach for their phones and load the emails. My roommate, one of the smartest and most accomplished girls I've ever met, shrieks excitedly. Delegates from states as far away as Mississippi, Vermont, and Massachusetts, grin as they look up from their phones. The tables of delegates erupt in applause as we congratulate our friends, confusing the normal Kennedy Center patrons. Once the sun goes down, we drift out onto the patio. We're staring over the illuminated D.C. skyline, taking pictures, laughing, remarking on just how good that chocolate cake was. As we walk in, heading towards the premiere of a beautiful concert piece, I'm reminded of the times I went to concerts as a little girl in swirling dresses, when my mother told me, "There will be times in your life where you'll have pain, but there will also be times in your life where you'll feel indescribable joy." And that night at the Kennedy Center was one of the times that I felt indescribable joy. Chocolate cake, friends, witty conversation, sleep deprivation, art — what more could you want?

It's the last day of our Washington Week, and we're laughing in the ballroom of the historic Mayflower Hotel. Sitting around a table, we're too tired to even figure out what's going on. I've had three hours of sleep, more than most of my friends, "wait, does that mean cereal is a soup?" I squawk. We're tired beyond belief. We're sad beyond belief, too. We came as friends — from thousands of miles apart, but linked with group chats and memes and late night talks and inside jokes. But now we're family. As my "mom" from Missouri leaves, I cry like a maladjusted preschool student. With my cousins, my uncles, my nieces, my nephews, my brothers, my sisters, my moms, my dads, from across the world, we count down to our departure.

It's hard to sum up what Washington Week meant to me, and I don't know if I will fully understand its impact until many years from now. At the moment, Washington Week is a collection of memories. It's why I'll walk to class with a huge smile, reminiscing about entering The Mayflower Hotel ballroom, feeling awestruck at seeing an original copy of the Constitution, the butterflies in my stomach when President Obama entered the East Room to greet us, or falling in love again as I remember the taste of the chocolate cake at the Kennedy Center.

But I know that no matter what, the USSYP experience has helped me bridge political divides, make incredibly close friends, and gain a newfound appreciation for our country and those who serve it.

More than that, Washington Week abated my cynicism about the political process, and instead inspired me to take a role in it. With the diverse range of speakers, I saw that there are niches for all of my diverse interests — from journalism to science to environmental policy and international relations.

It was pretty darn cool to “nerd-out” when Dr. Betty Koed, the Senate historian, discussed political history (my favorite subject!), to listen to Dr. Piers Sellers orate on climate change, or hear Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg speak on discrimination she faced. But perhaps even better was the opportunity to meet my fellow delegates and the incredible military mentors.

The military mentors, somehow, herded us sleep-deprived delegates all day long, cared for us, gave us advice, trained us not to eat like an immature 16 year-old after swim practice, danced with us, dispensed valuable advice, held bags, and inspired us. I feared that my highly-decorated military mentor would yell at me to do pushups in the middle of the night, but instead, Major Breezy Long shared her experiences with the armed services, laughed with us, hugged us, congratulated us, cared about us, and taught us about the importance of kindness, service, and poise.

So often, I wonder how I was lucky enough to be chosen to be in the room where it happens with these accomplished people. The delegates are nonprofit founders, journalists, Twitter prodigies, political geniuses, activists, athletes, and scholars. And somehow this nerd who spends her weekends badly dancing to the *Hamilton* soundtrack was chosen? A few days into Washington Week, I remembered what unites us all: sincere passion for improving the world. For some, this is through politics, by changing policies to improve the country. For others, it is through scientific research. With journalism, arts, teaching, business, nonprofits, astrophysics, writing, I have no doubt that we will change the world. But why wait? As Senator Mazie Hirono told us at the National Archives, “We can all make a difference - whatever station in life, wherever you come from.”