

There are moments in our lives that act as mile markers. These moments are the clear, emotion-filled memories that provide us some indication of when “everything else” happened. These moments are so beautiful that they make life bittersweet, as our realities provide no comparison. For me, Washington Week is this type of memory. Months ago, when asked why I wanted to attend the United States Senate Youth Program, I said that I was looking for inspiration. My exact words: “The simple reason is that seeing our government in action is one of the most inspiring experiences I can think of.” I may have expected inspiration, but to say that I expected the experience I had, would be an outright lie. While I have so much to say about my Washington Week, I feel one of the best ways to describe my experience is to share a few of many lessons learned.

As President Obama said, “If there was a moment in history in which to be born, you’d chose today,” I felt chills. My delight was in part due to the fact that as he said this he was standing within fifteen feet of me. However, my excitement was also due to President Obama’s rare positivity. I found myself floored by the fact that a man who not only holds one of the most dangerous, difficult positions in the world but also faces fierce criticism could be so encouraging. One of the greatest lessons I learned during Washington Week is that optimism exists in our government. Despite the differences between our speakers, one common theme was positivity. Washington Week showed me that the feeling of hopelessness that surrounds public opinion of government demonstrates the general lack of appreciation for our system. Our government is imperfect, but it is one of the greatest the world has ever seen. Washington Week provided me a refreshing perspective and a renewed faith in the world.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” In my high school, I feel the precariousness of a situation where “we the people” do not appreciate our empowerment by our predecessors. I see teenagers whose understanding of politics amounts to the superficial, soundbite explanation of a complex policy or person. I see an unfortunate reliance upon Facebook as a sole source of media. I see countless people that subscribe to stereotypical ideas of politics and politicians alike. For me, the apathy towards government that has such a presence in my school is genuinely discouraging.

Yet my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program showed me that apathy is not everywhere. From the first moments I stepped into The Mayflower hotel, I found myself immersed in an environment far from apathetic. I met people passionate about government, and committed to making a change. My fellow delegates admire and respect our governmental process just as much as I do. Of all the people I had the opportunity to interact with during Washington Week, I can say that my 103 fellow delegates were the most inspirational. It is because of them that I do not find myself entirely worried about the future. I am confident that there are at least 103 bright, motivated, caring people that will inevitably make the world a better place. I am so grateful that I got to meet them.

This brings me to the third lesson that this program taught me: there are good people who believe in the future. Of all the things that amazed me during Washington Week, one of the most surprising things was the fact that I was there. I am in awe of the immense generosity of The Hearst Foundations and their commitment to the future. The opportunity to attend a program like USSYP is rare at best. The work and the planning that went into creating such an experience for 104 students is beyond my comprehension. From the selection of military mentors to the careful selection of tablecloths, the entire week required multitudes of preparation and dedication. I strongly believe that the only real barrier in this world is a lack of opportunity. I am so thankful that I was lucky enough to meet such kind people that are committed to providing opportunity and bettering the future through empowering youth.

Washington Week will always be a mile marker in my life and a source of wonderful memories. Thank you to all the wonderful people and the incredible generosity of the Hearst Foundations. I will always be grateful for this opportunity.