

Durga Rathi, CT – 2016

I'm still in shock that I was even chosen to attend. I have been back in school for a while now and it still has not completely hit me. I am so, so grateful for the experiences that were simply placed in my lap throughout Washington Week, for the friendships and lessons I hope to keep close to me for as long as possible.

I knew right away that the speakers scheduled to meet with us would be inspiring. What I did not predict, however, was how impactful some of the delegates around me would prove to be. Some ran nonprofits; some founded and worked at their own businesses. One of my friends there set up and ran his own food truck in his home of New Mexico. My roommate was already helping to make education reform laws in her state of Oregon. It did not take long for me to realize that these people were so beyond my league, and I was perfectly fine with it. I had the profound opportunity to listen to other people, to soak up all the ingenuity, drive, and passion that so many of the delegates exuded.

When Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke to us, one particular detail especially stuck with me. She said that justices at the end of each day, regardless of their differing beliefs and opinions, would shake hands with one another. She said, "We recognize that we're serving an institution ever so more important than individuals." I immediately thought about the 103 delegates there in the room with me.

The depth and quality of their conversations made me believe that although the country is suffering from intense polarization, our generation will be able to help make things work. The delegates created an atmosphere in which conservatives and liberals could engage in discussions that danced on some of the most controversial topics American politics has to offer. Within those discussions that I engaged in or neutrally listened to, there was an underlying respect for the other person. After watching the way so many impromptu, informal debates would unravel on the bus, at breakfast, and at fancy dinners, I could not help but believe that this mutual respect stemmed from a deeper love for what this country stands for. We disagreed with each other, but we made sure we always listened to the other side. We knew democracy carries the most weight when its people hold a nearly panoramic view of their many diverse issues. Justice Ginsburg reminded me of how excited I was to one day see a few of my fellow delegates go out there and make change through comprehensive understanding.

When speaking about her time as a law student, when law was not yet accepted as a field for women, Justice Ginsburg reflected on her and her female colleagues' reaction to the inequality and prejudice they faced: "It's strange that we never complained," she said. That really struck me as fascinating. They never complained. I thought to myself, who else isn't complaining?

A moment when I felt especially proud and grateful to be where I was occurred when a group of female delegates including myself were speaking to a female military mentor, Captain Nadeem. She said she had posted pictures of herself and other women serving as the program's mentors on Facebook, and her fellow members of the military commented to ask if she was at a women's military conference; she explained that it was very rare to coincidentally have as many military women in one place as there were at USSYP. So why were there more women at USSYP than normal? She said the relative amounts of men and women from the military that serve as mentors were proportional to the relative amounts of men and women chosen as delegates. More girls were chosen, so more military women were chosen! "We should be thanking you," she said to us. I felt like I was an infinitely tiny piece of a persistent, gradual change that has long been taking place not only in our nation but in our world. I felt so incredibly lucky.

Thank you.