

Max Finkelpearl, DC – 2016

The president of the United States was standing about ten feet away from me, and the situation seemed so surreal that I almost burst out laughing. I was with one hundred and three other high school delegates to the United States Senate Youth Program and we were gathered in the East Room of the White House to have an audience with President Obama. And there the actual president was, reflecting on his presidency with us and encouraging us to continue to serve.

Surreal is a good word to describe Washington Week. Besides meeting with the president, we also had an audience with Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, ate dinner in the public vault of the National Archives, toured NASA's rocket-making facilities, visited the State Department's diplomatic reception rooms, and had the opportunity to hear from and ask questions of some of the most important decision makers in the country like senators and judges. I was born and raised in Washington, D.C. my entire life. However, living in "the District" is very different from being a part of "Washington." During Washington Week, I had the chance to witness up close what really happens in the Washington that we all hear about but is often so far removed from our daily lives.

One of the most powerful moments of Washington Week for me was listening to Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado speak to us one night after dinner. Senator Gardner is the Republican co-chair of the 2016 U.S. Senate Youth Program and a USSYP graduate himself. I had never heard of Senator Gardner before Washington Week, but I was compelled when listening to his humorous and inspiring life story. Before he had finished speaking, I completely forgot that he was a Republican and I was a Democrat, and that I probably disagreed with most of his positions. I was able to emotionally connect to his story.

I believe that one of the largest problems facing our democracy is that it is so divided along partisan lines. We all know too well how hard it is for Washington to get anything done. As Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee told us, "The most important thing for you to do is to stick to your own beliefs as much as you can." While almost everyone at Washington Week, including me, had deep-rooted beliefs, getting to know the other students helped me to get past them, just as hearing Senator Gardner's story helped me see him as more than just another Republican senator to whom I'm supposed to be opposed. Many officials who we got to talk to over Washington Week lamented how "back in the day," Democrats and Republicans may have disagreed, but they would still go out and have drinks together. Now, Washington is so partisan that few elected officials make an effort to get to know the other side. Perhaps if more people in Washington worked to get to know people of other political beliefs not as Republicans or Democrats but as people, more would get done.

Senator Gardner told us about how when he was in the U.S. Senate Youth Program, he arrived and immediately felt out of place. What was a student from rural Colorado like him doing in Washington? "Act like you belong," he thought to himself. I think of Gardner's feelings as I reflect on being ten feet away from President Obama and almost bursting out laughing at how surreal it was. Gardner finished this thought at the end of his story when he told us "You don't need to act like you belong because you do belong, not as passive observers but as active participants."

I thank the U.S. Senate Youth Program for reminding me how important it is to be an active participant in our democracy, and that to be an active participant one needs to see beyond their personal beliefs and seek to truly understand their peers on the other side of the aisle.

My fellow student delegates were from all across the country, and were without a doubt deeply passionate about the issues that concern them. By getting to know and connect with several of the delegates, I got to understand their stories and interests, and to see them as people as opposed to just their political beliefs or affiliations. An important takeaway from Washington Week, reiterated by several of our speakers, was to never become cynical about the political process. In the one hundred and three other delegates, I saw passionate, engaged, intelligent, likeable, and optimistic students from all across the country with unique backgrounds and beliefs. If we, as the next generation of politicians and policymakers, retain our optimism and willingness to learn from and connect with people who have differing beliefs, then we have a chance of breaking gridlock and working to solve America's most pressing problems.