

Meredith McCain, GA – 2016

When thinking back on Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program, I feel the need to sum up the experience in one word. But how exactly can I identify one sole word to encompass this life-changing event?

In French, there is a phrase: *le mot juste*, which translates to “the right word.” *Le mot juste* encapsulates the true meaning of an experience or event, always seeking the word with the most connotative relevance to the situation. As I sought *le mot juste* to describe the USSYP experience, I surveyed my fellow delegates to gain their insight. “Transformative,” “indescribable,” “scary,” “tiring,” “suh?” and “Trump-tastic” were just a few of the responses I received. But one word particularly stood out to me: *sonder*. This noun refers to the realization that every person lives a vivid and complex life, separate from our own, yet all of our lives form an intricate web that often allows for the chance crossing of paths. In essence, we are each one of many. I love the idea of *sonder*, and find it to be *le mot juste* to describe the US Senate Youth Program. It juxtaposes the motto we have heard repeatedly: “*E pluribus Unum*”—“out of many, one.” We have often read this motto on American coinage and documents, but in some ways it really reinforces a sense of isolation for us. I’m sure many who attended this program are familiar with the feeling of “standing alone,” whether they are the only one of their friends who cares about politics, or the only one speaking up for what’s right in their community. But *sonder* emphasizes our inherent connection with one another; we don’t stand alone. In fact, we are part of a whole. The United States Senate Youth Program really drives this point home; we do not stand alone in our desire to make a difference in the world. Rather, our vast array of disconnected experiences led us to meet one another in the capital of the free world. Though Washington Week may seem like a flashbulb in the scheme of the delegates’ lives, its effects will be that of a slow exposure frame. I won’t forget that exhilarating realization that I am one of many passionate individuals who can work together to create change. Isn’t that the goal of the actual United States Senate? In the words of Senator Cory Gardner, we should work “to be better tomorrow than we are today.” This advice has resonated deeply with me.

So what did I gain from the Washington Week experience? Well for one, I had the opportunity to be in the presence of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. That in of itself is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But the list of prestigious guests goes on and on: President Obama, senators, Chief Justice John Roberts, Secretary of the Department of Energy Ernest Moniz, astronaut Dr. Piers Sellers, among many others. Each speaker used his or her own experience to emphasize their views on leadership, teamwork, and politics. But what stood out to me personally was this collective thread—that we are one of many. The stability of our future is dependent upon our collaboration now. German ambassador Peter Wittig underscored the importance of the alliance between the U.S. and Germany in order to disseminate the values of the free world. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz emphasized the partnership between the public and private sector to advance a cleaner energy system. Mr. Jonathan Capehart, *Washington Post* journalist, advocated for our collective need as a society to become informed citizens and #ReadBeforeYouTweet. It is clear that we all bear a responsibility to work together to facilitate progress. Such a task requires us to “fight cynicism,” as President Obama said, reach across the aisle, and utilize the convenience of our chance meetings in life. Such actions could be profound enough to send reverberations of peace and democracy throughout the world.

Setting aside our animosities and realizing that we all share a similar passion for serving those around us will allow us to improve the world in ways we didn’t even know were possible. To quote President Obama, “focus less on what you want to be and more on what you want to do,” which will inevitably lead us back into each other’s lives to collectively make a difference.

I cannot thank The Hearst Foundations enough for giving me this amazing experience. From frolicking through D.C. with America’s finest students to breathlessly scribbling the speakers’ shared wisdom into a notebook, every moment was inspiring and empowering. And now, I have the opportunity to carry this experience with me, pursue my passion for public service with newfound knowledge, and spread the humbling sense of *sonder* that I witnessed firsthand at Washington Week.