

Timothy (T.J.) Foley, Jr., IA – 2016

I don't know how to describe the best week of my life other than to simply say that. In my opinion, words like incredible or unforgettable don't do it justice. However, in an attempt to find the right word, I came across an old Latin phrase that describes the spirit of this program: *non scholae sed vitae*, which means, "We do not learn for school, but for life."

This simple sentence articulates the experience that I shared with 103 other students from across the country. The opportunities afforded to me during the 2016 Washington Week would never have been possible in a classroom setting. Oftentimes, the study of history is confined to textbook pages and PowerPoint slides. The Hearst Foundations offered the 104 of us something that we could never access in classrooms. Instead of preparing us for a test, the United States Senate Youth Program educated us for a different purpose: to pursue a life of public service.

My USSYP journey started out with a 4:30 a.m. drive to the Des Moines airport. Sitting in the car gazing out the window, I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into. I arrived in our nation's capital that afternoon and encountered my fellow delegates. As we sat at tables and talked, it became abundantly clear to me that this group of people would be the most incredible I would ever have the privilege of encountering. I could go on for hours about the conversations I had, the jokes I've cracked, and the optimism I found after realizing that these were the leaders of America. On Day One we talked into the late hours of the night, playing cards and becoming fast friends with our fellow political junkies. Although I would like to describe every activity I experienced with these incredible people, space allows me to recount only a few treasured memories.

The next day, we visited the memorial and estate of the man who transcended politics, founded our country, and looms large over the history of the world. Mount Vernon reminded us that despite our disagreements, America was founded as a land of opportunity where people can work together to solve problems. The most striking moment of our tour was when our tour guide pointed to a large metal key displayed in a glass case. She explained that this key opened the front door of the famous French Bastille, and was given to George Washington by Marquis de Lafayette. This symbolized Washington's status as the "patriarch of freedom" throughout the world. That afternoon, we toured the Newseum and spoke to its CEO about the problems associated with an uninformed electorate and a biased media. During the tour, I walked around with five other delegates, four of which have party affiliations different from my own. Despite our differences, we engaged in a lively and informed discussion about the future of our country and what the proper role of government is. Importantly, in a world choked by pettiness and personal attacks, there was not a negative word uttered about any person there. I am honored to count those I talked to among my friends today. This moment of civility reminded us all that politics doesn't have to be entirely personal attacks.

The respectful dialogue continued throughout the week. I ate meals, cracked jokes, and discussed life with political opponents and allies alike. Even though we may have disagreed on many issues, there was evidence of a strong mutual respect between each delegate. The ability to put friendship ahead of politics is just one more reason why this group is the greatest I have ever had the privilege to participate in. On Tuesday afternoon, we entered the most famous house in the world and met with President Barack Obama. To see the leader of our nation stand five feet away from me and answer our questions is a sight I shall not soon forget. He reminded us that despite the problems we face in the world, if we could choose any time to live in human history, we would choose right now. This renewed my hope for our future and reminded everyone, regardless of his or her views, that our generation will only make the world a better place.

Every night, six delegates would meet after the day's events concluded to discuss the issues facing the world. Among us were one Republican, two Independents, and three

Democrats. These discussions were intense and covered a wide array of topics, but every night ended with a smile, handshake, or hug. Despite our strenuous disagreements on matters of health care, education, national security and diplomacy, respect for one another was never lost. Of all the incredible speakers, fantastic conversations, and amazing sights I experienced, it was these debates that will forever leave an impression on me.

I would be remiss if I did not thank a number of people in this essay. First, to my military mentor and the other mentors who bravely fight for our country each and every day: your service, guidance, and wisdom are deeply appreciated. Without you, Washington Week couldn't happen, and I will never forget the stories you shared and sacrifices you make for our nation. Second, I must thank The Hearst Foundations, their entire staff, and Jakub Mosur and Erin Lubin. You gave me an opportunity of a lifetime and facilitated the assembly of the most decorated group of people I could ever hope to encounter. The scholarship will make a difference as will all that I learned in Washington Week. I struggle to find the words to adequately thank you for what truly was a life-changing opportunity. Third, I must thank all of the speakers who gave of their time and wisdom to share their thoughts with us. You made Washington Week special, and without your time, this program would never have existed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I must thank all my fellow delegates. Be it for laughing at my bad jokes, for forgiving me when I may have stepped on your feet at the dances, or for your friendship and thoughts, you made this week incredible. I look forward to seeing what all of you accomplish in life and will forever treasure the time we spent together.