

Helene Slinker, MO – 2016

On March 5 of 2016, as I left my house and embarked on my drive to Kansas City International Airport, a flood of excitement rushed through my body. I was on my way to board my flight for Washington, D.C. and experience the whirlwind week that was Washington Week 2016 of the 54th annual United States Senate Youth Program. As the time ticked down to arriving at The Mayflower Hotel, I wondered and wondered what all would be included on our packed agenda for the week. Whatever it may be, I thought, was sure to create the best week of my life. Looking back on my experience during that week, I am so pleased to confirm to myself that it was truly the greatest opportunity I have ever been given in my life.

When I arrived at The Mayflower Hotel and began introducing myself to other delegates, I could instantly tell that I was in the presence of truly the brightest kids in the nation. Already, delegates were making political jokes and having respectful conversations with one another about political issues. Everyone appeared to be extremely tolerant and willing to listen to others opinions rather than drowning out opposing dialogue. As politics is often referred to as gridlocked or polarized, it was incredible to meet young leaders who truly valued bipartisanship and respected other's beliefs. However, my experience with the delegates of the 54th annual Senate Youth Program was more than just an opportunity to discuss politics with other young leaders; it was truly a time where I made incredible friendships that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I'll never forget the moment when, on the first day of the program, a delegate ran up to me at the Mayflower and jumped into a hug with me before we even introduced ourselves! We were all so excited to meet one another and the excitement of being with such accomplished people stayed with us the entire week. Since the program has ended, the delegates and I have still had political discussions, sent each other pictures of puppies and memes, and planned possible reunion locations. The laughs I have had with these delegates and the memories I have made will stay with me forever.

In addition to the amazing times I had simply being with my fellow delegates, I truly learned a lot during the program. One of the most interesting parts of the trip was when we were able to tour the NASA Goddard Center. I learned a lot about climate change from Dr. Piers Sellers of NASA, who left me feeling inspired to lead the change I wish to see in the world for future generations. I have always decried myself as "not a science person," but after I left NASA, I grew a newfound appreciation for the organization and the missions they accomplish. It was truly incredible and I have not stopped talking about it since I left Washington. I also learned a lot about the importance of the First Amendment after touring the Newseum and listening to Newseum CEO Mr. Jeffrey Herbst. Mr. Herbst taught an important lesson to me and my fellow delegates. He taught us that the algorithms used by social media sites such as Facebook often pair us with news sources that fit our political beliefs. In addition, we tend to follow accounts on Twitter that match what we believe. Mr. Herbst taught us that there will never be any compromise if we do not ever allow ourselves to learn what the other side thinks. He challenged us to reach across the aisle and follow pages we disagree with in order to expand our minds. His perspective on this was very inspiring to me and encouraged me to reach out to engage in more discussions with people who have disagreements with me.

Without a doubt, the best part of my week was at the White House. The memory of meeting President Obama will live within my mind forever. My entire body was shaking with anticipation as my fellow delegates and I stood in the East Room of the White House waiting for him. That moment alone is something I will never forget. When the president walked into the room, a smile broke out on my face that I could not contain. All I could think was, "I can't believe I get to be here. I can't believe this is real." President Obama left us with perhaps one of the most inspirational quotes. With such eloquence, he told us, "Do not worry about what you want to be; worry about what you want to do." President Obama's words have changed my perspective on my future. With his words in mind, I have shifted my mindset from valuing the importance of titles and achievements to valuing action.

When Washington Week 2016 came to a close, it was very hard for me to say goodbye to my fellow delegates. I will never forget the moments I shared with them and the people I have met. However, these experiences were not taken for granted; there are so many people I have to thank for my incredible experience. First and foremost, I wish to thank The Hearst Foundations for even making my experience possible. The Hearst Foundations made Washington Week a week to change a lifetime for me. I also am

incredibly grateful to my military mentor, First Lieutenant Emily Meyer of the U.S. Marine Corps for being such an incredible person. Lieutenant Meyer gave a great atmosphere to the program and truly made me appreciate the hard work of our servicemen and servicewomen. She also taught me so much about the military. I would also like to thank the teachers I have had in my life who have encouraged me to be a leader in public service. Specifically, Mr. Christopher Brush, Mrs. Jenna Adkins, Ms. Jessica Kendall and Dr. Kevin Overfelt have been great educators and believers in me. I also am eternally grateful to my family who have supported my path to the great accomplishment of being a Missouri delegate.