

Jackson Wilkins, MS – 2016

This is going to be a tough one.

I mean, how could I possibly summarize my unbelievable week with the United States Senate Youth Program? Should I talk about the earth-shattering speakers who shared their wisdom with us over the week? My fellow delegates who have inspired me with their passions and talents and have become some of my closest friends? The *ridiculously* incredible food?

I'll start with my fellow delegates:

I still remember how it felt to walk into the Grand Ballroom of The Mayflower Hotel on the first day of Washington Week and see everyone gathered for the first time. The room was frenetic with a nervous energy as we clung together in shy groups, exchanging small talk and our excited expectations for the upcoming week. I doubt that we realized then how close we would become: the tear-inducing laughs we'd share, the transformative debates we'd engage in, the esoteric catchphrases we'd exchange ("suh"). We transformed from a group of politically-minded strangers to a group of politically-minded close friends, and these connections are ones that I will forever appreciate.

Though it often appears that our politics have become irreversibly polarized, my fellow 103 delegates have renewed my optimism for our future political dialogue as a nation. It was inspiring to see Sanders supporters and Cruz supporters sitting side by side and engaging in constructive, informative dialogue rather than devolving into the vitriolic and acrimonious invective we've become accustomed to seeing on the nightly news. I hope that my fellow delegates' respect for mutual understanding of opposing political beliefs will one day be transposed to politics at large, so that our political system will be more conducive to positive change for a wider range of people.

But not only my fellow delegates have affected me — the speakers who talked with us have also catalyzed in me a desire to do, to serve, to change. By listening to President Obama, multiple senators, Justice Ginsburg and many more paragons of leadership speak to us, I've recognized shared characteristics between them that are emblematic of leadership: overflowing passion, a dogged pursuit of justice, and an entrenched belief that through enough hard work positive change is always possible. These lessons were wellsprings of wisdom that I will continue to draw from in my own future pursuits to help create a more just world.

One of the most unexpected aspects of Washington Week experience was how incredible it was to interact with and befriend our military mentors. Before the trip, I half expected the military mentors to be austere martinets — stern, unflinching and intimidating. Instead, I encountered in our mentors some of the kindest, brightest and inspiring people I've ever met. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Lieutenant Commander Juan Santiago's large role in making my Washington Week unforgettable. His service to our country is a true inspiration, his knowledge of military workings immense, and his mentorship and advice to me throughout the week extremely valuable.

And the food may or may not have been just as life changing as all of the above.

All-in-all, I will never cease to be incredibly humbled and grateful to The Hearst Foundations for my United States Senate Youth Program experience. Every year, the Foundation — and everyone like Ms. Rayne Guilford and Ms. Lynn De Smet who work so hard to plan and coordinate Washington Week — indelibly changes the lives of the 104 delegates fortunate enough to participate in the program. It certainly changed mine.