

Sean Lynch, NE – 2016

A few weeks after I left The Mayflower Hotel, bleary-eyed and only half-conscious from lack of sleep, I learned that my great-uncle, Dan Lynch, had died at the age of eighty-six. We were not very close; I saw him only once a year at my family's annual Christmas party. However, despite not knowing much about him personally, I knew much of him. Like his father, uncles, and brothers - one of which being my grandfather - he was a plumber, raised amidst the row houses and four square houses that were crammed around the warehouses and meatpacking plants of South Omaha. Instilled with the stories and struggles of those around him, he became an advocate for them on the Douglas County Board and eventually the Nebraska legislature where he authored the state's first motorcycle helmet law as well as created a center for developmentally disabled adults. In the days following his death, as I was reflecting upon it and upon Washington Week, I realized that the people that I met and the stories that I heard in D.C. contained the same themes that were embodied in the frail but jovial man whom I saw during those Christmas parties.

The first similarity that I noticed was also the most basic: politicians were actual people. Like everyone else, I had succumbed to the easy fallacy of believing political leaders to be made of marble. Reading their speeches that were carefully combed for any sort of innuendos or hidden slights gave me the impression that they were simply voice boxes for a certain set of ideas like characters in a medieval morality play. However, in hearing them speak, in watching their reactions as delegates asked them questions, I saw their authentic selves. Listening to Justice Ginsburg explain her love for opera and her desire to see the complete Ring cycle, for example, introduced me to a side of her that is outside the scope of a fiery dissent or line of questioning. Having Senator Lindsey Graham remark to us, "Sorry for the security," although some swear he said 'social' instead of 'the', caused me to look at him as someone more than just a face on Sunday morning talk shows. Rather he, like all the other guests who spoke to us, was a real person who too disdained security checkpoints. Nowadays there are hardly any opportunities to interact with our political leaders directly so we tend to see them as figureheads, and we lose any connection to them.

Washington Week changed that. Washington Week also reaffirmed that our nation's leaders, despite the overblown rhetoric and hackneyed accusations, have a genuine desire to improve the country, which is a message that is desperately needed in such cynical times. Whether it was Senator Gardner's plan to save millions of dollars in energy costs by retrofitting government buildings to make them more green to President Obama's vision of removing money from politics, politicians of both sides were attempting to make our nation stronger and fairer for all. Betty Koed, the Senate historian, bolstered this theme by providing examples about the effect that past and often unsung leaders have had like Henry Wilson, a shoe cobbler from Massachusetts who rose to become a fierce advocate for abolition and whose bills became the foundation for the XIV and XV Amendments, which are perhaps the greatest pieces of legislation ever passed. This is not to say that obstacles to progress don't exist. Bickering and saber-rattling between competing parties and visions remain an impediment. However, what Washington Week showed me was that our democracy remains in the hands of those who have our nation's best interests in mind. And when these interests are implemented, such as when my great uncle passed a motorcycle helmet law, they have real and hopefully salutary effects on the public.

Dan Lynch was buried on an unusually warm Monday morning in late March, but the lessons that he and all the people who spoke at or contributed to Washington Week remain with me. Because of them, I will always remember that our leaders are real people who have hobbies and enjoy doing the same activities that we do. I will remember too that they have a genuine desire to ameliorate the state of this nation even if I sometimes think their desire is misguided. Too often, politics is thought of as some struggle for power, a place where Ivy League degree holding lawyers can duke it out to see who can garner the most attention. However, as I learned during Washington Week, politics is much greater than that. Politics, ultimately, is about empowerment, about giving the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized in our society a voice because sometimes those voices, like that of a poor plumber from the crumbling streets of the River City, can make a difference in the world.