

Matthew Welborn, OK – 2016

Definitive experiences are a rare thing. When you read the biographies of the great men and women you admire, you notice a pattern; that in the life of every great individual, a moment of inspiration set them on the path to achieve whatever it was that they would make their life's work. I had grown anxious, fearing that I may never get to experience one of these "a-ha" moments. This was, of course, before I was selected to spend a week in our nation's capital with the United States Senate Youth Program, an event that will definitively shape my future.

Incredible would not be a sufficient description of the week. This was the third occasion on which I had journeyed to Washington, D.C., but this trip was something entirely different. I entered the week with preconceived notions that this would be a week of touristy activities, and while I was excited about that, there was nothing particularly special about the idea of getting to tour the mall, as this is something that millions of people do each year. However, when I arrived I quickly concluded that I was dead wrong and that this was a unique experience on which I was about to embark, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get to peel back the skin of our federal government and take a look inside.

When I arrived at The Mayflower Hotel, I quickly became aware of the high caliber of people which I would spend the week. Honestly, from the first moments in the beautiful Mayflower Hotel I began to realize how special the week was before me. My favorite part of the first day in Washington was getting to meet all of my fellow delegates from across the nation and getting to interact with program alumni. The other delegates were different from kids that I go to school with in the fact that they had similar interests with me, particularly in studying politics and government. On this first day we also met our wonderful military mentors for the week that took us around and were our guides for the week. I know that I will never forget my mentor, Lt. Mike Keating of the U.S. Navy and I appreciate the example he set for me during the week.

When I returned home from the trip everyone wanted to know what we did all day. I told them all about the incredible speakers that we got to listen to each day and all of the insight they were able to give about government and the nation as a whole. To be honest it's hard to say that any of the speakers really stood out, but that is merely because they were all so very articulate in delivering their well thought out messages to us and then they all were so good at answering any questions from us. For me personally, I was extremely happy to eat lunch with the director of NASA, Charles Bolden, one afternoon before he spoke to us. It was incredible to sit and speak with a man that I have learned about in school and have read countless press releases from him. It was surreal.

Throughout the week there were many surreal moments, where we felt like we were standing inside a television set. The feeling of these moments was by far my favorite part of the week. Nowhere was this uncanny sensation more powerful though, than when we went to visit with the president. I remember it crystal clear, and I probably will always remember the moment when the president came walking down the hallway. It was an image that I was familiar with, watching the same man walk down the same hallway a number of times in the past during press conferences when he was addressing the nation. But this time it was different because I was there; I was a part of the room. For me this was easily the most incredible moment of the week. It was a week filled with inspiration and insight, a week where we, student delegates, were direct witness to the action of our nation's capital, and through the generosity of The Hearst Foundations, we were able to see behind the scenes of Washington, D.C.