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### A Look Back: Glimpses of Humanity

President Barack Obama walks down a hallway in the White House. He strides purposefully, lush red carpet underfoot. His destination? It is not a podium to deliver remarks on Syria or a room full of cameras eager to capture his thoughts on guns in America. It is a room full of 104 eager teenagers, including me. I can hardly believe my eyes as he approaches. An unfettered aura of power and charisma seems to envelop the room as he enters. Yet, as he answers our questions for what is, without a doubt, one of the greatest hours of my life, I begin to notice other things. I notice his hair, gray from the stress of 7 years of the presidency. I notice his worry, when one of our delegates faints from standing too long.

To me, this event perfectly encapsulates the United States Senate Youth Program experience: the combination of power and awe with vulnerability and humanity.

Throughout the course of the week, I crossed paths with some of the most impressive people I have ever met. The speakers that we heard represented a cross section of the most powerful people in government. I went to the Supreme Court and listened to Justice Ginsburg talk about gender equality. I toured NASA and heard top administrators talk about climate change and space travel. Secretary of Energy Moniz told me about nuclear weapons. I had personal conversations with senators about college affordability. To even begin to recount the highlights feels like entering a dream. The topics discussed were the most pressing issues of our time, and these people are the most equipped to handle them. Yet, throughout every speech, throughout every discussion of terrorism and taxes, there was humanity. It came when Senator Gardner spoke of his pride when his son chose him as his role model. It came when Justice Ginsburg raved about opera. It came when the parliamentarian told of the occasional loneliness that follows being an apolitical umpire in an increasingly political world. It came weeks later, when we discovered that Dr. Sellers, the same inspiring man who had taken time out of his schedule to speak with us at NASA, had cancer and was using his remaining months to fight climate change.

The same phenomenon occurred with my fellow delegates. They were a group of truly incredible people. They were smart and thoughtful, with unique perspectives, opinions, and motivations. Best of all, they wanted to talk about politics. Meals meant conversations about everything from campaign finance reform to health care. We didn't always agree, and these disagreements didn't fall strictly down party lines. The civility, respect, and depth of knowledge displayed in all of these conversations were unparalleled for me. Yet, just like the speakers, some of the most powerful moments came when there was vulnerability. In quiet bus conversations and the shared delirium of an all-nighter, I heard of hopes and dreams. We recounted the saddest moments in our short lives and our fears for the future. On the dance floor, we flailed our awkward limbs about with attempted dignity.

Politicians are people. They're people with families, aspirations, and insecurities. They may hide behind a wall of power, intellect, and pressed suits, but that doesn't change what's underneath. The U.S Senate Youth Program helped me realize this. It gave me a chance to get up close and personal with the most influential people in government. I met my icons and enveloped myself in intellectual conversation with truly incredible peers. At the same time, it gave me a chance to peel back any aura of invincibility and witness the endearing humanity that lies underneath. Thank you to everyone who helped make Washington Week one of the best weeks of my life.