

Caroline Moriarty, SD – 2016

Critics of our generation always talk about how we are cynical about politics. I have always believed them and have been cynical myself. I have had good reason to be. On a national level, presidential candidates like Ted Cruz and Senator Bernie Sanders represent completely opposite sides of the political spectrum and pull their fellow candidates away from moderate rhetoric. Congress has been gridlocked and partisan ever since Obama was elected in 2008. In South Dakota, I see how my friends and neighbors pick candidates because of their political affiliation rather than what the candidates believe in. With all of this in mind, I crossed “anything political” off my career list and began to think about other options.

This mindset was completely upended when I arrived at Washington Week. The first thing I found was that I had the most intelligent conversations with other delegates from all over the nation with all different views. We talked about everything from the legalization of marijuana to the Citizens United Supreme Court decision. I got new ideas and new viewpoints that really made me more open about many different issues facing our country today. I was also blown away by how passionate our speakers were. By the end of each presentation, I knew that each speaker wanted to make our country a better place and they didn't fit the mold of the typical politician that the media portrays them to be. The two speakers that I thought really embodied the passion I saw in our speakers during Washington Week were Ms. Julie Adams, secretary of the Senate, and Ms. Elizabeth MacDonough, Senate parliamentarian.

Each speaker during Washington Week has the delegates from their home state introduce them and give closing remarks. I'm from South Dakota, so I didn't give any remarks and didn't get to meet any alumni from either Dakota. However, much to my delight, in the introduction of her speech, Ms. Adams told us that she grew up in Iowa and went to Luther College, which is only four hours away from my hometown. I was so excited that there was someone working in the Senate that wasn't from an Ivy League school and a coastal state. Her advice: “live in the moment and take opportunities even if it deviates from your plan” really resonated in me. Her positive attitude and inspiring advice made me so proud to say that I came from the same region as her.

Ms. MacDonough exuded just as much inspiration and passion in her speech. I couldn't believe that she remained nonpartisan in such a partisan Senate. Her whole job is based on the love of the rules that make an efficient, sound Senate. When she told us she has been named in lawsuits concerning how she enforces these rules, I was amazed. And when someone asked her about Senate term limits, an issue I thought I was strongly in favor of, she answered “no” right away. Her advice for ending a Senate term was: “get off the couch and vote.” She cited examples of states that made these laws and made it clear that more experienced politicians are the ones that can really be successful in the Senate. She showed me that being nonpartisan didn't mean not having opinions about what was best for America.

Washington Week is an experience that I will never forget. I am no longer another political cynic. I am more open to those who do not believe in the same positions I do, and I work to make my beliefs less partisan and more American. I am so thankful to The Hearst Foundations and to those who work to make the United States Senate Youth Program a transformative experience in the lives of the next generation of students.