

Claire Barnett, TN – 2016

One-three hundred and twenty-three millionth. Otherwise denoted as 1/323,000,000. As a single person out of so many in the United States, it is easy to feel like your opinions, your ideas, and ultimately your votes don't matter. That was my mindset, before going into Washington Week. Needless to say, I emerged from the experience as a new type of citizen - an empowered one.

My vote does not count any more than anyone else's - but it does not count any less either. This realization altered my perspective, and I now see myself as someone whose opinions have value in our political system. Meeting people who I would typically only see on television - and recognizing that they had made time to speak to us - was inspiring. If my status as one individual (soon-to-be) voter hadn't been important, these influential leaders would not have bothered to dialogue with us. Furthermore, I was amazed at the faith that influential people such as judges and senators placed in the USSYP delegates throughout the week. They honestly seemed to believe in our abilities as current and future leaders. After so many role models expressed their confidence in us, I too began to believe that we truly can and will change the world.

If empowerment was the first lesson I learned, prudence was the second. After realizing that the people in D.C. are actually normal folks, I learned that they must exercise caution in order to make wise decisions. This sounds like a ridiculous thing not to have known beforehand, but Washington didn't seem relatable or accessible before, and I had never considered the processes government leaders went through to make hard choices. From hundreds of miles away, it is easy to judge our government leaders as incompetent or foolish, but up close, I realized that these individuals are actually exercising careful judgment, backed by extensive research, to make the best decisions for our country. Recognizing this also galvanized me to take my responsibility as an *informed* citizen more seriously. I have the obligation and privilege of being knowledgeable about the issues and policies that apply to my country.

We heard the perspectives and advice of dozens of the nation's leaders and influencers - but one stood apart to me. Every speaker had worthwhile insight to offer us, but there was a single individual who imparted wisdom with her actions, rather than her words. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was by no means the loudest speaker we heard from, but she clearly communicated to me the value of humility. Despite her impressive power within the United States government, Justice Ginsburg was soft-spoken and considered each word carefully. I was incredibly impressed by her quiet and thoughtful demeanor. I now strive to emulate her humility in my life, and I hope and pray that I will one day be half as successful.

Should I one day experience that future success, it will, in part, be due to the United States Senate Youth Program. The exposure I have had to a variety of fascinating, and often differing, viewpoints has impacted by worldview. I have been transformed into a more empowered, prudent, and humble citizen. For this, I owe a debt of gratitude to the adults who organized and funded Washington Week, as well as the speakers who addressed us. However, the greatest thanks of all must be extended to my fellow delegates - you guys are intelligent, passionate, and considerate. With such amazing people living across the United States, I have no doubt that our country is in good hands for years to come.