

Justin Cross, TN – 2016

I can still remember the rush I felt when I received the email saying I had been selected as a delegate to represent Tennessee at the United States Senate Youth Program. I was ecstatic! I had dreamed of being selected for this program for two years, and now it had happened! But what I didn't realize then was how truly amazing and life-changing Washington Week would be. Nor did I realize the friendships and lasting connections I was on course to create. I had no idea at that time how much my interest in government and the political process would soon peak. Most of all, I had no way of knowing that I wasn't just accepted into a program - I was accepted into what I truly believe is one of the most influential experiences I'll ever have the chance to enjoy.

From my first arrival in Washington Dulles Airport to the final dance on Friday night, Washington Week can really only be described in one word: special. Everything about the week was extraordinary. We stayed in the beautiful Mayflower Hotel, where just a few floors above us stayed Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. We were shuttled around the capital city to hear from some of the most important and influential men and women in America. We were served some of the finest meals in some of the finest places. Around us sat 104 of the nation's finest and brightest young leaders. Intermingled with them were our amazing military mentors, who proved to be some of the most amazing people I've ever met. Finally, running from event to event were the incredibly humble and hardworking people who made the whole event happen. There was not a dull or unenjoyable moment in the entire week.

In addition to each of these amazing aspects of the week was what we were truly there for: experiencing government first-hand. Throughout the week, we visited the Supreme Court, the Capitol, the White House, NASA, and much, much more. At each of our stops, we were able to hear from distinguished individuals. Each one provided insight into what it's like holding office and how each of us can potentially find ourselves there. While each speaker focused on his or her respective speech topic, there was one commonality from all of the speakers: we can still create and produce change even if we aren't in positions of authority or in office. This was perfectly communicated to us by President Obama when he said, "Focus on what you want to do, not who you want to be." Keeping this in mind, Washington Week helped me figure out what I really want to do: help and serve others. When we weren't visiting government places, we were visiting museums, monuments, and historical attractions. I would have never expected it coming into the week, but experiencing the judicial branch first-hand proved to be one of my favorite parts of the trip.

Though each of these aspects was incredible in their own right, perhaps the highlight of the week was the time and fellowship spent with the other 103 delegates there from across the country and world. With each of these individuals, I was able to engage in meaningful dialogue about politics and government. It was not the usual rhetoric and arguments that I often find myself engaged in at home. Rather, it was enjoyable discussion about government and the political process. When we weren't discussing politics, each of us was having the time of our lives. We laughed, bonded, and really got to know each other. There was not one person there that I did not enjoy meeting and with whom I did not enjoy spending time. I can't thank them enough for making the week so memorable.

Another surprise highlight of the week was the time spent in our small mentor groups with our military mentor. Captain Mike McCarthy really was one of the best parts of the week for me. I am so glad to have gotten to know him. As a group, we still communicate every week together. The time spent with those eight gentlemen was simply phenomenal.

All in all, Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program was one of the best parts of my time in high school. I am so fortunate to have had the chance to partake in the program, experience Washington Week, and connect with the other delegates of the program. I know that the course of my life has changed because of my experiences in this program. Even

still, I find it difficult to put into words how amazing the entire program was. I am so grateful to The Hearst Foundations and the amazing program staff who make the program possible. Without you all, I would have never had this amazing experience. I am also grateful to have met and interacted with the amazing attendees of the program, including delegates, military mentors, and other guests. I am already encouraging students at my school to apply for USSYP this fall because I know this program is one that nobody wants to miss out on. I am honored to consider myself an alumnus of this program, and I am excited to see the future of it!