

Having the honor to represent the state of Texas at the 54th annual United States Senate Youth Program was an absolutely incredible experience that I will unwaveringly cherish throughout the entirety of my life. From the moment I stepped off the plane and ran into accompanying delegates, to our arrival at the grand Mayflower Hotel; I knew that Washington Week was going to be nothing short of remarkable. However, going through the reflection process is easier said than done. How exactly can I wrap up the mind-blowing experience that is Washington Week? I feel like all delegates past and present have asked this once before. Nevertheless I'll give it a try.

First, there are the delegates - all 103 astonishingly accomplished young adults that strike me as the epitome of inspiration. From walking and talking memes/social constructs to volunteers on presidential campaigns, runners of nonprofits and leaders in their communities, I genuinely have no doubt that they will accomplish sheer greatness in whatever field they chose to pursue. From the beginning of our time together in the GroupMe that houses all 105 of us (someone is in there twice - we just can't figure out who), I knew that the discussion of foreign relations, domestic politics, and attempting to solve the world's problems over text was going to be ill compared to when we would finally meet on that life changing Saturday in March. The varied perspectives, long debates and willingness to reach across the aisle made me appreciate what Jeffery Herbst of the Newsuem was talking about when he said, "It's not surprising that our national conversation is deteriorating," because in a way it was, but with the people surrounding me I doubt the negative connotation implied will be permanent.

Then comes the thrill of being in a city that housed so many leaders both past and present (delegate companions included) and has seen so much reform in the legislative process. From our time at the Supreme Court to the National Archives to the White House itself, I could see everyone's motivation prosper as the city's life force washed over us and took hold. Thinking back, I could hardly pick the biggest life changing moment. I remember being content sitting on the floor of the Kennedy Caucus Room munching on chocolate covered strawberries and laughing with friends from South Dakota, Ohio, and New Mexico (all of which were the first and only people I know from those states) as we are waiting to meet our senators. Or discussing our college futures at a Hawaiian themed dinner in the next room from where the original Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights and the Constitution were housed. Or maybe it was when I teared up a smidge as we craned our necks in anticipation of catching a glimpse of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as she took pictures with the New York delegates (still not bitter) before she made her grand entrance into her chambers to speak with us. Or definitely it was when I was marveling over the fact that the Court room smelled like coconuts and I was just fifteen feet from where a pillar in the Hispanic community, Justice Sonia Sotomayor sat, deliberated and made decisions on where her vote would be cast.

Either way, how many other teenagers can say they stood four feet from the president of the United States as he reflected for an hour about his seven years as president and the state of our nation or that they danced to Usher and Fetty Wap with an Oklahoma Judge and executives of the amazing program that was responsible for bringing 104 students to D.C. and giving them the tools they need to make a difference in this world.

In the midst of all the energy and excitement, Washington Week was truly a very humbling experience. I genuinely believe that what made the United States Senate Youth Program have such a significant impact on me was that it showed that there are real individuals with purpose behind the face of our government. We were able to see firsthand all the issues our nation is facing and the relatable individuals tending to them.

Opinions towards politics might be shifting as the nation's view of what was once respected changes, but for me, this program solidified what I believe is my purpose in life. I may not know exactly what I want to do - stay in Texas as a senator or governor, branch out to another community, tackle issues on the grassroots level or head to the other side of the world to combat international issues - but I do know that I want to inspire change to help individuals see a better tomorrow. As President Obama is enthusiastically quoted as delegates have taken his words to heart: "Don't focus on what you want to be; focus on what you want to do."

With this, we are now at the stages of our goodbye.

After all the inevitable heartfelt tears and hugs that took place at 4 a.m. on March 12th, the best week imaginable concluded. Even though less than four short days later I was back walking the streets of

D.C. on a college visit - something was very wrong. The leaders of our country embodied in stone still stood tall overlooking the city, the White House was as grand as ever, the Cherry Blossoms were still just at the peak of their bloom. When I walked down one street and up another, I could finally spot the difference. The Mayflower Hotel stared at me as we both thought back on the 103 other individuals that Washington was missing.

The truth of Washington Week is that the speakers were amazing, just remembering that I was in the presence of such astonishing leaders less than a month ago is even hard for me to believe and I was present. But what makes Washington Week unforgettable was the fact that 104 future leaders in the political *avant garde* (or simply just political nerds) were brought to Washington in the midst of our diversity for an opportunity to meet individuals whose advice and dedication have aided and guided us as we embark on our journeys throughout the nation. In the words of Judge Robert H. Henry, "You have been chosen, you are very lucky."

We are lucky in a way, as our generation takes the gavel in one hand and the Constitution in the other and we apply our unforgettable experience to our lifetime as public servants.

To The Hearst Foundations, thank you. This program has been a gift, every detail was perfect and I am forever grateful. Through the doubling of our scholarships, my attending of Georgetown University in the fall has been made that much more possible. To Erin and Jakub, thank you for the beautiful pictures, your abilities to capture such impeccable moments of our trip has made the experience that much more exceptional. To our military mentors, thank you for your service to our country. I never felt unsafe under your watchful gazes and I especially want to thank Captain Meng for the kind words of encouragement and the many laughs.

And lastly to my fellow delegates, I cannot wait to see you on the Senate floor, in the Courts, in the White House (don't forget we were all promised Cabinet positions), and especially on all the amazing college campuses in the fall. We are quite an exceptional group and I wouldn't have wanted to walk up Capitol Hill with anyone else. 'Suh' and farewell friends.