

Monica Marciano, VA – 2016

Weighed down by my gym bag, backpack, and books, I struggle through the front door. “There’s a package here for you,” my father tells me. Standing in the middle of my kitchen in my sweaty basketball uniform, I glance warily at the name on the packet. Seeing the look of anticipation on my face, my father suggests, “A rejection packet would not be so large.” A moment of silence hangs in the air, only broken by a voracious tearing through the envelope, shouts, and a sudden leap into my father’s arms. The moment I first learned of my acceptance into the United States Senate Youth Program was surreal, and even now it is difficult to believe that I have had the privilege of hearing from some of our country’s greatest leaders and public servants, seen some of Washington’s innermost places of policymaking, and met 103 of the brightest people that I have ever had the opportunity of befriending.

Amidst this illustrious week, many experiences come to mind: eating with State Department officials in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room; frantically taking down notes from every speaker, whether it be a chief judge or an astronaut, or sitting up straight in my seat to catch every possible glimpse of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. However, three experiences in particular have stuck with me.

During our first visit to the Kennedy Caucus Room, Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams and Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough remarked upon the importance of kindness in politics and provided us with a glimpse into the life of unelected officials. Their positivity, wide smiles, and eager greetings of me and two other former Senate pages were testament to their advice about compassion, showing us that in the fast-paced world of Capitol Hill, there is always time to care for others.

Perhaps just as memorable as this first visit to the Kennedy Caucus Room was our second. As we were all herded into multiple single-file lines, military mentors talked over their earpieces, scholarship certificates were handed out, and all people, delegates, staff, and Hearst Foundations representatives alike, bustled in anticipation of the annual Senate Reception. When my senators’ names were called, my fellow Virginia delegate and I were ushered into the middle of the floor to greet them. Senator Warner surprised us by remembering tidbits from our applications, and Senator Kaine spoke with us at length about our goals for our future careers. As he took out a pen to sign my scholarship, Senator Kaine asked me whether or not I would be running for his Senate seat in the future. Although I laughed off the question then, the faith that Senator Kaine and so many of the other speakers had in both me and my fellow delegates was truly inspiring. As Senator Gardner told us in his speech one night at dinner, “You don’t need to act like you belong because you *do* belong. You belong in D.C. You belong in your school. You belong in this nation, not as passive observers but as active participants.” This sense of confidence in myself, in my generation, and in our ability to change the world is one of the greatest lessons I will take away from Washington Week. And should I ever forget it, all I need to do is open up my scholarship; forever memorialized there are Senator Kaine’s subtle words of encouragement to me: “Good luck in your future Senate race!”

No matter what I end up choosing to do in my career, this lesson and the advice of President Obama, will always ring true: “Worry more about what you want to do than what you want to be.” Although watching President Obama walk into the East Room is possibly one of the most surreal experiences of them all, his advice to us could not have been easier to understand. While there is an immense pressure on us to identify what we want to be, we should instead be pinpointing our passions. By resolving to do what we love, the question of “what we want to be” will resolve itself naturally.

For me, Washington Week has helped me to realize even further that my personal passion is public service. Surrounded by the beautiful sounds of the symphony at the Kennedy Center on one of our last nights in D.C., I unexpectedly became emotional. The sonorous drama and complexity of the music spurred me to reflect upon the week: introducing Ambassador Peter

Wittig in the elaborate Anderson House; debating issues such as climate change and national security at the dinner table; touring NASA facilities; running to and from the monuments to maximize selfie time; making friends that will last a lifetime. As the strings of violins and the rumble of drums guided me through this journey once more, I was left with one overwhelming feeling: gratitude. Gratitude to The Hearst Foundations, to the United States Senate, and to all of the military mentors and staff who made my extraordinary experience possible. Although I plan to be back in D.C. in the not-too-distant future, I will never quite experience it the same way I did in the March of 2016: young, on the brink of all that the world has to offer, and all that I have to offer the world.