

Ethan McCollister, VT – 2016

The hours that followed my arrival at Burlington International Airport bordered on interrogation. From the moment I dropped my luggage in my parents' car, they bombarded me with question after question. And as soon as they took a break, it seemed a relative would immediately appear on my phone's screen, calling in to pick up where they left off. I was asked about every aspect of my week in Washington, from the personalities of my fellow delegates to the quality of the food. Yet there seemed to be one type of question that I consistently lacked a sufficient answer for: What did he/she say? This was, of course, referring to the incredible group of speakers we had the privilege of hearing from over the course of the week. However, thinking that I would be able to remember quotes verbatim, I opted to just listen and be present rather than take notes. Unfortunately, I soon realized that I was unable to tell the interested parties more than a single phrase or two. However, I wasn't about to let the wisdom of some of our nation's most important individuals disappear into the ether of my forgetfulness. Instead, I did what I've been doing for most of senior year: asking for other's notes.

Of course, my fellow delegates loved the idea of a "shared document to compile quotes and memories," as I called it. As I set up the page, listing out each speaker we met with and each event we attended, I was struck by the sheer quantity of them all. In just a week, we experienced more than most do in a lifetime. Even more impressively, the individuals we heard speak were not just those who are impacted by the debates raging throughout our country. Rather, we heard from those who research, write about, interpret, defend, and make those decisions. The weight that these perspectives carried and the magnitude of the opinions presented is incomparable.

Almost immediately after I shared the document with my peers, they started to write in it. A line was added here; an entire paragraph over here. Bit by bit, the central meaning of the speeches became apparent through the compiled quotes and commentary. Almost every speaker, amidst the stories of their rise to prominence and their solutions to critical issues, spoke about *us*. Senator Cory Gardner told us that "You don't need to act like you belong because you do belong." NASA Administrator Charles Bolden advised us: "Don't ever let anyone tell you you're not the right sex, the right race, the right color, because you can do anything you want to do." President Barack Obama imparted upon us: "Don't focus on what you want to be; focus on what you want to do". Few things are quite as uplifting as three intelligent and powerful individuals saying that you can be successful.

Delegate after delegate contributed to the document. It was a beautiful example of collaboration. This sense of community neither began nor ended with that collection of quotes, however. Whether it was the group chat that began months before Washington Week or congratulations on college acceptances that continued long afterwards, this group of 104 brilliant, engaged, and kind people formed ties around a myriad of connections - sports teams, colleges, and of course politics. Regardless of how those bonds were created, I have faith that they will remain strong for a long, long time.

This simple document, created as a means for me to escape the scorn of my relatives, ended as a microcosm of the entire, life-changing experience. If someone with no connection to the United States Senate Youth Program were to read through the now -11 pages of text, they would be amazed by the opportunities we were provided. They would read the quotes and be impressed by the praise heaped upon us, saying that we will accomplish great things. Yet, they wouldn't understand the inside jokes. The references to phrases and dinner conversations would be lost upon them. Those moments and relationships were just as important as many of the speakers. I do believe that every delegate could accomplish incredible things. But I know that not because a senator or judge prophesied such; I know from the conversations over dinner in the National Archives, on the bus ride to Goddard Space Center, and in the middle of the night in a hallway in The Mayflower Hotel.

I am beyond honored to have been chosen to represent Vermont at the 54<sup>th</sup> United States Senate Youth Program, and I am proud to be able to say that I've met, know, and am friends with the 103 other delegates. I cannot wait to see what they accomplish.