

Marisa Sylvester, VT – 2016

While I walked into the ballroom at The Mayflower Hotel on March 5, nerves wracked my body and butterflies filled my stomach. The doubtless greatness of my fellow delegates intimidated me, and I feared inferiority in comparison. When I took my first few steps into the ballroom, I just wanted to act like I belonged.

Just days later, surrounded by new friends and wrapped in fascinating, intelligent political dialogue, I heard Senator Cory Gardner tell a similar story. When speaking to us about his experience as a USSYP alumnus and subsequent entry into politics, Senator Gardner told us a story about one of his first political events. While on the campaign trail, he met the star of his favorite movie, *Red Dawn*. Because his campaign manager had advised him to “act like you belong,” he passed up a chance to really interact with his favorite star for fear of seeming too impressed. Later, Senator Gardner realized that he *did* belong, as we all do. He then advised us that “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 who will solve these great challenges.” I immediately connected to his words, as I underwent a similar experience at the beginning of Washington Week.

Among my fellow delegates were Students of the Year, a TED Talk speaker, valedictorians, Senate pages, Ivy League admits, and more. I felt almost inadequate in comparison to these impressively accomplished young men and women. Once I got to know my fellow delegates, however, I started to realize the same lesson that Senator Gardner did: I don’t need to act like I belong. I *do* belong. Although I may not have the same accomplishments or attributes as my amazing fellow delegates, I have things that nobody else can bring to the table.

What makes America great is quintessentially this. Nobody must act like they belong, as we are not a homogeneous nation. USSYP taught me the value of perspectives from around the country and the importance of diversity in political dialogue. The only things all 104 of us had in common were citizenship and passion; our genders, races, party affiliations, and almost everything in between varied greatly. However, during Washington Week, we all belonged. The nature of America and its politics demands that ‘normality’ must cease to exist, and what defines our nation is the very idea that none of us belong.

Over the course of Washington Week, I learned that not belonging is impossible in American politics. We often fall victim to the partisanship and division all too prevalent in modern political discourse, forgetting the progress our nation has made and the enduring beauty of the American dream. President Obama reminded us of this hopeful reality with the inspiring proclamation that we “live in a time that is healthier, wealthier, more educated, more tolerant, less violent, and more accepting of each other’s differences than ever before.” Our own president urged us to remain optimistic in the face of increasingly negative media and debates, focusing instead on the positive changes we have made, including tolerance and the importance of diverse perspectives in politics. We must now rise to the opportunities and challenges issued by President Obama, sharing our respective opinions and experiences in respectful, intelligent dialogue to ensure that our government reflects our own spectrum of diversity. Because none of us belong, we all belong. I truly feel blessed that Washington Week 2016 afforded me with that realization.