

Lucy Ma, WA – 2016

The morning that I flew out to the U.S. Senate Youth Program's 54th annual Washington Week was the first time I had ever been so excited to wake up at 3 a.m. As my first trip to Washington, D.C., I was restlessly anticipatory for all the adventures, new experiences, and memories I would make. I can say with full confidence that Washington Week did not disappoint.

If someone asked me what Washington Week was about, I would reply that its most prominent theme was that of youth empowerment. President Obama told us, "Do not worry about what you want to be, think about what you want to do." Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg entreated us to "fight against lower standards set for us by others every day." Director of NASA Dr. Charles Bolden Jr. pushed us to "reach for new heights, to discover the unknown." It was amazing and encouraging to see the adults' belief in the power of us, the youth, as the future generation's leaders, to make change and resolve the difficult issues facing our world. From meeting momentarily with a senator or former federal judge, to working every day with our inspiring military mentors, my most notable impression was how they did not distinguish us as any less capable or less qualified because we were younger. Their example exemplified the importance of respect in any situation, reminding us of this critical quality that is often forgotten in the midst of intense political debates between strongly opinionated figures on national stages. In this way, all the speakers, organizers, and our mentors, as well as my fellow delegates, empowered and inspired each other to pursue their greatest potential, even in the face of what others may characterize as insurmountable differences or weaknesses.

However, while I loved the passionate debates and critical political dialogue in which all the delegates were willing to engage, the most memorable aspect of the Washington Week was the compassion, positivity, and love for service that characterized all the delegates, mentors, speakers, and organizers. Washington Week consistently broke through typical partisan stereotypes surrounding Capitol Hill and shed new light on many difficult issues, especially revealing the motivated individuals who worked day and night to make our country a better place. Senator Mazie Hirono quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasizing that "greatness is defined by making positive change in other people's lives." Whether I was speaking to a student from another state, USSYP director Rayne Guilford, or Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, we were all bonded together by this passion for public service, from local communities to the whole nation. As one of the few students interested in pursuing a STEM field, it was at Washington Week that I came to clearly see my pursuits of medicine as another way to fulfill my potential as a public servant. The other delegates interested in politics and law warmly accepted me regardless. What impressed me most were the delegates' own positive mindsets and visions for the future, in spite of a culture and world so often characterized by premonition and cynicism for the future. I have never met individuals as motivated and highly accomplished yet also as humble, supportive, and eager to bring more good into this world as my fellow delegates of the 54th annual U.S. Senate Youth Program.

My experiences at Washington Week have transformed my perceptions about politics, encouraged my continued pursuit of greater, unprecedented accomplishments, and reinforced my passion for service. To live in such a great nation with so many brilliant, motivated minds that are driven toward service is incomparable and invaluable. I am eternally grateful to everyone who made this experience possible for further opening my eyes to my own potential and power for achieving change. After a week of politics and adventures, I look forward to a lifetime of knowledge, memories, and friends. Washington Week and all the delegates will always epitomize the confident empowerment and wholehearted dedication to public service that I seek to emblemize with my life. I close my commemoration of the 54th annual Washington Week and the testament to my love for the U.S. Senate Youth Program with one of my favorite quotes from President Obama: "If there was a moment in history in which to be born, and you didn't know ahead of time if you would be rich or poor, black or white, woman or man, you would choose today."