

Emma Turner, AL – 2017

As I was heading down the escalator to baggage claim at Reagan Airport, I was nervous. I would soon be surrounded by some of the most accomplished students in the nation. Was I really qualified to be here? But when I began to approach the group of Military Mentors and one of them cheered, "It's one of my Alabama girls!" I was immediately put at ease. She was excited I was there and quickly told me about her career as a lawyer in Mobile. Soon after, I was whisked away in a black SUV to begin one of the best weeks of my life.

The awe that I felt walking into The Mayflower Hotel was soon brushed aside as I met my fellow delegates and found that they were far more impressive than any building. Even that first night at dinner I had a conversation about sexism in politics with informed peers that went far deeper than anything I would expect with people I had known for two hours.

There were people that we met that week who few others get to hear from; the two that I will always remember are the parliamentarian of the Senate and Chief Justice Roberts. The parliamentarian of the Senate is a job that does not lead to much press coverage, except the occasional appearance on C-SPAN. For this reason, I found her speech to be one of the most interesting. It was raw and a truthful account about the behind the scenes of the Senate.

Chief Justice Roberts was also an experience that drew back the curtain on Washington, D.C. Walking into that chamber took my breath away. The history that has occurred in that room and the great men and women who have walked those floors, flooded into my head. As the chief justice walked in we stood silently, careful not to clap. It was incredible standing before one of the most important people in the world. As he answered our questions about the gym upstairs and the dynamic of the court, it was clear that he too was human. The façade that Washington Week removed off of some of the most powerful people in the world is one of the things that I really valued.

Before Washington Week and in today's political climate, I had become cynical, believing that our elected officials were not in Washington for the right reason. However, after Washington Week I found myself feeling relieved. The veil of partisanship and cable news was lifted as we met with real people, not caricatures. Almost all people come from a place of good intentions; we all just want to help our fellow Americans. There are simply different ways of approaching the problems that America faces.

The overwhelming sense of patriotism and pride I felt during Washington Week will be hard to replicate. The United States Senate Youth Program has shown me that it is my duty and privilege to continue to improve our country. Because I had the honor of experiencing Washington Week, I am never allowed to be complacent. Our country needs all 104 delegates to continue to work and improve the lives of all Americans. I have learned that public service is the noblest of causes. I cannot wait to watch where the delegates from 2017 end up. I know that we all now have a common cause of service to our country and our world.

When people ask about Washington Week, I will tell them about the big things — meeting the president, asking questions of the chief justice, or having lunch in the State Department. But I will carry with me the little things — the political debates on the bus, the deep conversation about military mentors, and the advice that every speaker gave. I am forever grateful to The Hearst Foundations and everyone who made this week possible. This week forever changed me, and I will carry the memories and friendships for the rest of my life.