

Meena Venkataramanan, AZ – 2017

“The greatest challenge to democracy is that people don’t care about it.” These words were articulated by Chief Justice John Roberts to the delegates of the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program. As they resounded among the marble pillars of the hallowed Supreme Court of the United States, I glanced around to take in the presence of my 103 fellow delegates seated at the wooden benches behind the bar. With us at the helm, I was beyond confident that democracy would remain alive and well for years to come.

The first time I set foot inside The Mayflower Hotel as a delegate to the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program is a moment that shall never wane in my memory. As I sauntered directly beneath a procession of resplendent chandeliers ushering me into the Grand Ballroom, I felt a nervous excitement rise and ebb within me. A sea of unknown faces swiveled to greet me upon my entrance – a mélange of program staff, alumni, Military Mentors and delegates. At that moment, I knew that this experience would be unparalleled.

After a long day traveling eastward from our arid desert dwellings, the Arizona delegates were among the last of the group to arrive in the breathtaking (and humid) city of Washington, D.C. As my co-delegate and I joined our fellow students in the Grand Ballroom that evening, little did I know that in the coming week, I would share unrestrained laughter, tears, and experiences of a lifetime with them – and ultimately, would come to call some of them my closest friends.

Initial introductions were typical – consisting of bashful salutations coupled with an inevitable stumbling over the names of 103 of my peers. But as the sun continued to rise and set upon the nation’s capital in the coming days, my fellow delegates and I formed lasting bonds that transcended the small talk we had so punctiliously learned to master during the week (how else were we going to network with the esteemed leaders we regularly met?) During the course of lavish meals situated in illustrious locales such as the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room of the State Department and the vibrant Rotunda of the National Archives, our nuanced discussions ran the gamut from the current state of American politics to our favorite bands. Clad in our finest blazers and brogues, we attracted the attention of several passersby as we triumphantly marched down the National Mall, confident in our ability to someday lead the very nation that gifted us with this opportunity of a lifetime.

From asking the chief justice of the Supreme Court about the changing face of the law in the wake of technological progress to hearing the president of the United States unequivocally affirm that one of us would succeed him in the future, the experiences afforded by Washington Week were ones that left me in disbelief. While I was not only humbled by the presence of nearly eighty U.S. senators standing just a few feet away from me during the annual Senate Reception – senators whose names had once headlined prominent presidential campaigns – I was also inspired by my fellow delegates that surrounded me throughout the week. I noticed that while each of us had a unique story – ranging from the vibrant thoroughfares of New York City to the frosty Alaskan perimeter of the Arctic Circle, we shared core American values that would undoubtedly progress our nation forward in the coming years. This, coupled with our ideological and geographic diversity, a collective drive to take action in our communities, and a respect for one another, was more than enough to sustain the democracy to which Chief Justice Roberts alluded in his address to us.

But Washington Week was more than just a series of policy addresses and inspirational lectures. It was an opportunity to reflect upon a shared American history while relishing the company of some of the brightest young minds in the nation. I will never forget standing on the steps on a rainy day at the Arlington National Cemetery, huddling under an umbrella with two of my new friends while watching two committed servicemen perform a wreath-laying ceremony dedicated to unknown soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the democracy that we enjoy every day. Nor will I fail to remember playing late-night group games with my fellow delegates in the Grand Ballroom after an exhausting day discussing global concord at the United States Institute of Peace. Likewise, I will always recall exploring the Pulitzer Prize Photographs Gallery at the Newseum with my peers – overwhelming emotion collectively piercing our hearts as we immersed ourselves in both heartbreaking and empowering images. Because above all, it was these bonding experiences that ultimately made my week as a U.S. Senate Youth Program delegate the best week of my life.

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Weeks after the conclusion of this transformative program, I find myself perpetually ruminating on the lasting imprint that the United States Senate Youth Program left on me. Though located nearly 3,000 miles away from my sunny hometown of Tucson, Arizona, the nation's capital and its plethora of handcrafted memories from Washington Week will forever remain close to me. My 103 new friends are just one click away, while the words of esteemed public servants are readily accessible within the dense pages of the moleskin journal in which I documented the week's experiences. I have no doubt that my path and those of my fellow delegates shall cross once again, and until they do, I shall carry with me the greatest lesson that this program has taught me: that it is we – the young people – who are in control of the steering wheel driving the hallowed vessel of American democracy. And until we make our voices resound across its decks, freedom cannot and will not truly ring.

For teaching me this, I am forever grateful to the United States Senate Youth Program.