

Isha Dalal, CT – 2017

The open dialogue I participated in, the laughs I shared with delegates I now call my best friends, and the memories I made with 103 of the most talented people I have ever met shaped Washington Week into the best week of my life. While that phrase is thrown around frequently in today's society, I truly mean exactly that. Washington Week was the best week of my life.

There is something special about being surrounded by so much excellence: so many people whose goal is to make an impact on the globe. I remember walking into the Mayflower on the first day knowing absolutely no one, wondering what exactly this week would entail, and then on the last day, walking out of the Mayflower in tears as I left some of the best people I have ever met. Engaging in civil discourse about issues that engulf the media was incredible as each delegate was informed about what was happening in our country. Each opinion was informed and backed with facts. However, each opinion was also welcomed with open arms, and everyone was willing to listen.

As the Senate Youth Program group arriving right after the most controversial election in American history, delegates definitely had strong opinions, and every opinion wasn't the most popular. Yet, with representation from both sides, from the most liberal students to the most conservative, there was never a shortage of dichotomy in thought. This dichotomy reminded us that our nation's democracy was based upon these differences: differences that were represented by the delegates and the thoughts they had to share.

Moreover, learning about my fellow delegates' lives was eye-opening. Listening to the work that they do within their own communities is inspiring and reminded me why it's so important to care and to ensure that we remain active within the community. Some of my best friends from that week are working to amend their state's Constitution, working with local professors on social science research, and running campaigns for local officials. These are the types of students that I realize I will only have the opportunity to meet once in a lifetime.

Every day of Washington Week was packed with a multitude of activities that immersed us into Capitol Hill. Within one day, we had the chance to meet the president of the Save the Children Action Network, the director of National Counterterrorism Center, Senator Cory Booker, and the president and vice president of the United States of America. While in Washington, the gravity of the situation did not dawn upon me as I moved from venue to venue, from one extravagant meal to the next. However, after arriving home, I realized how rare of an opportunity this was. The words that each speaker had to say resonated with each delegate differently, but after each presentation, we gained new insight about the inner workings of Washington. We each had gained some advice on life, and each been congratulated for our work in the community thus far.

One particular speaker that stood out to me was the surgeon general of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy. His speech was not centered around his own accomplishments or the incredible work that he has done. Rather, he tailored his presentation to the delegates and our lives. Each student in that room hopes to make an impact of some sort, but at the age of 17, nothing is set in stone. He told us to do activities that fulfill us, to think short term instead of long term, maintain relationships with those that matter most, and take risks because "each and every person has a deep well of potential within them". It's okay to be uncertain and to take time to truly think about what we would like to achieve in life. As long as we take risks and leaps of faith, we will change the world for the better and help those that need it the most. This vote of confidence and this idea that it is okay to be confused reminded me that even the most impactful people go through a journey that has ups and downs, and that was a takeaway that I truly value.

To the next class of the United States Senate Youth Program, congratulations. This week will transform how you think about government and how you perceive the world around you. This week will make you crave dessert with every meal when you get home, and ask for a buddy everywhere you go. This week will remind you to be thankful for every opportunity that you have been given, and to be grateful for all that you have. This week will help you realize what a small world it really is as you run into

your fellow delegates on college visits and maybe even the same school. Speaking of which, value those relationships because those delegates will be some of the best friends you'll ever have.

Thank you to The Hearst Foundations, everyone from the program, and to the United States Senate for reminding me why I would like to serve our nation.