

Cyrus Shanehsaz, DE – 2017

A lot of people have asked me about Washington Week. What did I do, what was my favorite part, did I enjoy the week? Every time, I felt as though I couldn't do the program justice with my words. It was the single best week of my life without a doubt, yet I struggled to explain what made it so great. Obviously the opportunity to be addressed by the president, vice president, secretary of State, countless senators, a living legend, and other government superstars was a truly once in a lifetime experience I will never enjoy again, but so much more went into Washington Week that I could never seem to capture. This is my best attempt at explaining the Senate Youth Program and what it really was to me.

From an outside perspective, the United States Senate Youth Program is a series of exclusive tours, discussions, and guest speakers encompassing all aspects of public service and American history. We had the opportunity to visit historic sites including Mount Vernon and the Anderson House, and even explore the National Archives after hours by ourselves. Our tours also lead us through the Senate offices, the Supreme Court, the Capitol Building, the White House, and just about any other prominent institution one could imagine. We were addressed by the highest-ranking officials representing the American people, and some of the foremost minds in government and public service alive today.

All of this can be learned from reading itinerary, and is what people see when I describe the week. What cannot be discerned from description alone is the impact these experiences had on myself and my fellow delegates.

One of the most interesting aspects of Washington Week was its ability to humanize. Being addressed by figures like Chief Justice Roberts, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and Bob Schieffer was almost disappointing; after seeing their faces on television and names in the news, there they were, only fifty feet away from me. I had a personal conversation with Senator Tom Carper and Senator Chris Coons, talking about college and my future as I would with anyone else. I even took a selfie with Marco Rubio for God's sake. These are people who are held to the standard of being almost superhuman considering the amount of responsibility they have. They were otherworldly and existing on another plane that no common people could ever reach. Washington Week brought these people back down to Earth as I realized they are all regular people too. They laugh, cry, and have fun the same way everyone else does. It does not take someone born of royal blood to take office or lead the country. While shattering the massive pedestal I had created for our leaders was somewhat of a letdown, it was even more inspiring. Someone like me has the ability to help shape the future of this country the same as all other citizens, regardless of how I view myself relative to those in power today.

The United States Senate Youth Program also instilled in me a genuine sense of patriotism I would never be able to develop anywhere else. I have always had the utmost respect for the military, but it reached a new level following my week with our mentors and a trip to Arlington. Hearing our Military Mentors' stories, extremely diverse backgrounds, and absolute devotion to this country was one of my first extensive interactions with members of the military. They were also some of the kindest, funniest, and most thought-provoking individuals I have ever had the pleasure of being around. There were countless discussions I had with them, insights they gave me into shaping my future, and hilarious antics that occurred over the week (especially with Captain Dierling).

In addition to these interactions, one of the most powerful moments for me was during our visit to Arlington National Cemetery. As the bus crawled slowly through the hills and the white stones rolled by, I felt a great sense of guilt overcome me. The endless graves were a visualization of the sacrifice that countless men and women have made for freedom, democracy, and this country. Without them, I would have nothing. I was brought to tears as the bus approached the central memorial. As we packed the steps facing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a gentle rain created a scene of perfect sobriety. Taps rang out through the air, and I felt a connection to my country I had never felt before. I will never understand how much others have given up for me, nor can I ever hope to. As Senator Corey Booker reminded us, "You cannot pay them back. You have to pay it forward." After experiencing such a moment, my love for the United States grew beyond what I can describe in words. It has provided everything I have, and despite my potential issues with those running it, I owe everything I have to it. Nothing could have instilled patriotism the way our Military Mentors and visit to Arlington National Cemetery did, and I thank Washington Week wholeheartedly for allowing me to realize how much I owe to my country and those who have come before me.

As powerful as these moments were, I still believe the true impact of the United States Senate Youth Program is in the way it brings people together. Nothing else could bring the one hundred and four of us, coming from every corner of the country and even different parts of the world, together in such a way. As cliché as it sounds, meeting my fellow delegates was the best part of the conference, and I don't

think that feeling is reserved to me. A former delegate from Delaware told me that she hardly remembered any of the speakers they listened to or places they visited so many years ago. However, to this day, she still has best friends that she made during the program. All of us are so similar yet so diverse, and it allowed me to make more true friends in the span of a week than I had in the span of four years of high school.

It would take days for me to go through all the individual stories and memories I have from the trip, but I think this has summed up the essence of what it was all about. While staying in The Mayflower Hotel, eating three course meals in some of the most exclusive places in Washington, and living the epitome of elite life was a fun excursion, the true impact of the United States Senate Youth Program was in the lessons we learned, the patriotism we developed, and the friendships we made.