

## Sydney Honeycutt, FL – 2017

Each time I have opened my journal upon returning home from Washington Week, a flood of incredible memories and emotions reemerges. As I sit here, sifting through the pages, I struggle to condense my experience into a mere essay. The seven days spent in Washington, D.C. as a delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) undoubtedly changed my life. When I boarded the plane to return home, I reflected upon the momentous impact Washington Week had on my being. My perspective of the world broadened, my knowledge of government expanded, and my passion for public service was ignited.

Entering the Grand Ballroom on arrival day was a surreal experience. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by 103 other youth, who came from unique backgrounds and each possessed a distinctive worldview. As an individual from a small southern town, I seldom encounter those with drastically different life experiences than my own. Washington Week was enlightening; I was able to engage in enticing conversations with educated and passionate individuals who were openly accepting of opposing viewpoints. Through these eye-opening encounters with my fellow delegates, I saw the promising future of this nation.

As a young person, it is quite easy to neglect to realize how expansive the world is around us. The whirlwind schedule of Washington Week provided a myriad of experiences I never could have imagined; this allowed me to uncover the world of opportunities that awaits. I never realized prior to this experience, that I was subconsciously limiting myself and my future. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy enlightened us that, "Big things start in small places." This insight continues to resonate with me, as this simple statement proves that the dreams I have for my life are truly within my grasp. Perhaps the delegates, all coming from small places, can each spark pivotal events themselves. Through mindful steps, the change I desire to create is indeed achievable, regardless of current obstacles or geographical locations.

While meeting prominent political figures such as President Trump, Vice President Pence, Chief Justice Roberts, and Secretary Tillerson certainly contributed to the remarkable experience; there were lessons intermittently sprinkled that ultimately changed the way I view the world. Each experience and encounter repeated the same theme: the importance of letting life guide you to the path you are meant to take. Hearing from successful and influential people that doors will open for me as it did for them, alleviates the stress of aspiring to have my life intricately planned. Speakers such as the Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer and Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden shared their personal journeys and explained that unlikely paths led them to their current roles in public service. As the speakers were sharing their stories, I truly understood that it's the moments that matter, not the depth of a pre-determined plan.

I have been home for close to a month now, and have been making a conscious effort to do my part in generating a positive impact on the world around me. One of the defining lessons I learned during the week occurred as we sat in the rotunda in the National Archives, enjoying an elaborate dinner within reach of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Senator Heitkamp of North Dakota was the keynote speaker that night, and shared her take on important key issues within today's political climate. Towards the end of her speech, she asked the delegates, "What is your legacy going to be?" At that point, I realized that all of the experiences throughout Washington Week would be imminently lost unless all 104 delegates collectively chose to take what we learned back home. My legacy would be insignificant if I simply returned to *status quo*.

It was difficult to adjust to the monotonous schedule of school and daily life compared to the dynamic and enlightening week I left behind. Transitioning from politically-charged debates with fellow delegates to the close-mindedness of some peers at home, was not a simple undertaking. Although I wished Washington Week would last forever, all good things must come to an end. But, that is truly how big things happen; new perspectives within the same environment create endless opportunities for growth. Therefore, even though returning back to my school and everyday life closed the chapter of USSYP, the next chapter of my life was opened to make those small moments grow into big changes. Now equipped with the experiences and perspectives necessary to make lasting impacts in the world, each delegate from the program has the potential to be a catalyst for positive change in our respective communities.

Each inspirational speaker, fancy meal, selfie with friends, sing-along on the coaches, and friendship developed during Washington Week significantly changed each person who had the privilege of partaking in the program. Just as each delegate entered Washington Week with distinct perspectives, each left having been unambiguously impacted in a profound way. Washington Week has led me to find the passion within myself to pursue public service one day. While that was my first trip to Washington, D.C, it will certainly not be my last. Reminiscing on this program always brings about a slew of emotions and nostalgia. The friendships and memories gathered will be held dear to me for the rest of my life.

Historian of the Senate Betty Koed once shared with our group, "Everyone is important, everyone can bring about change and create history." I look forward to seeing how the USSYP Class of 2017 makes their mark and undeniably changes the world.