

Alvin Winston II, GA – 2017

It is with great pride that I say Atlanta, Georgia is the best city on Earth. Being the city where Coca Cola was founded and headquartered, the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr., the location of the 1996 Olympic Games, and the hip hop capital of the world, we have a lot to be proud of. Despite all of its glory, Atlanta still has its flaws. We tend to have work environments that are integrated and diverse, but remain a city that is residentially segregated. Not only do I live in a majority minority neighborhood, but I also attend a very homogenous school where 97% of the school's population is black. My school also lacks political diversity as the majority of the student body identifies with the Democratic Party. This was far from my experience as a delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program where students from all 50 states came together to form a group that truly represents the diverse tapestry that constitutes our country's citizenry. The memories made during the course of Washington Week were by far some of my best high school experiences.

During the course of the week, The Hearst Foundations did an excellent job attracting the nation's best and most intriguing speakers. As high school students, we are often bombarded with speakers who deliver the same clichéd speeches about how we should follow our dreams and let nothing stand in our way. Not only were the speakers featured during Washington Week inspiring, but they often challenged us to address the nation's most pressing issues that they are still working to solve themselves. We heard from former Chief Justice of the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals Robert Henry, who stated that some of the judicial issues our generation will face will include questions involving equality, technology, and the ethics of science and bioengineering. Dr. Jeffrey Herbst, president and CEO of the Newseum, stressed the importance of seeking quality and credible news sources in this era of "fake news." CBS News journalist Bob Schieffer brought to our attention that a high number of journalists are concentrated in New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., and helped us recognize the important role local journalists play in providing information to a community.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy shared that one of the most important things to have in life is a group of anchors, (friends and family) who will not only keep you grounded in your beliefs and convictions, but will also challenge your thinking. The program had no shortage of these people. Not only were delegates genuinely curious to get to know each other, but we also eagerly stayed up debating political and social issues that have a direct effect on our generation. What I loved most about the program was the freedom to learn and grow without the anxiety of worrying about a grades or competition amongst peers. This environment made it possible for me to grow closer to other delegates in a week than I have with many of my peers in four years.

The Senate Youth Program also did a phenomenal job of humanizing our nation's leaders. When you stand feet away from the president and vice president, senators, the chief justices, and a world-renowned journalist, you quickly realize that they are human with flaws and personal challenges like the rest of us. Similar to the way my parents attempt to make decisions that are in my best interest, I realized Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota seeks to do the same for her constituents, regardless of where the partisan divide has shifted for the week. As a student, I can often be seen running to class in an effort to prevent accumulating another tardy, so I was not surprised when New Jersey's Senator Cory Booker ran to the Senate Floor for a vote immediately following his speech to us.

On the last day, and even a month after the program's conclusion, it has been difficult to fight tears and nostalgia. From the day I stood in disbelief as I found out I was accepted into the program, to the nights I stepped outside my comfort zone and danced as if no one was watching at the causal dances, I will always fondly look back over all my memories from the week. Additionally, I can proudly say I have a friend in all 50 states.