

Kathy Min, ID – 2017

Passerby always contorted their gaze into one of peculiar bemusement when they saw us, a small legion of teenagers dressed in suits and pantyhose, flanked by intimidating military officers, march past. I watched other students our age in neon tee shirts and emblazoned caps smirk at our austere wear; the agape curiosity of onlookers lined my periphery. As we strode past the steps of the Supreme Court, swaggering tourists clapped and reached out to shake our hands. And I, customarily shy from attention, smiled and shook my head. They could have their laughs, bewilderment, and bravado — I had a meeting with the chief justice of the highest court in the land (which, Justice John Roberts would later explain to us, was actually a basketball court).

There is one song from the critically acclaimed musical *Hamilton* that I believe encapsulates Washington Week, “The Room Where It Happens.” In this song, Aaron Burr laments his inability to be involved in political negotiations and backdoor deals, always viewing politics from the outside. And while opportunities like meeting the chief justice are perhaps not analogous to the shady arrangements made under the table that Lin Manuel Miranda lionizes, they do represent the incomparability of the Senate Youth Program, which promises — and delivers — a look at Washington from within.

The ability to meet, converse with, and learn from a wide array of speakers and public servants, exemplifies this invaluable insider perspective offered by the Senate Youth Program. Entering the week, I held a plethora of preconceived notions for many speakers, most especially for some political leaders. In his speech to us, Robert Henry, former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, remarked that, “We should vote for the person, not the issues.” And certainly, in my whirlwind week in D.C., I discovered there was more to each speaker than I had previously assumed: Surgeon General Vivek Murthy’s humility was boundless, as he reminded us of his own uncertainties and insecurities amidst his vast personal accomplishment. Senator Heidi Heitkamp’s inspiring words of great personal adversity, challenges, and passion echoed an unwavering commitment to her values. Although the stances of my senator, Senator Jim Risch, diverge from mine more often than not, I found him to be gracious and personable; he even brought his wife to the Senate Reception, where we all shared laughs about an old photo from the last time I briefly met the busy senator. (We all agreed that his photographic methods were rather ingenious, and it was a pity that other members of Congress didn’t copy his idea.)

In the same way that our distinguished speakers accentuated the humanity in politics, so too did my interactions with other delegates and Military Mentors. My North Dakotan roommate, Alyx, had seemingly infinite energy, excitedly conversing with delegates during the day and diligently filling out her journal into the late hours of the night. Ananda from Wisconsin surprised me, her graceful composure from the beginning of the week bubbling into our collective cackling at the back of the coach that I’m sure alarmed those around us. My conversations with Prathusha (a Michigander? Michiganian? Michiganite?) ranged from campaign strategizing to the future of party politics to our favorite bands and music festivals.

One particular interchange with my fellow delegates always stands out to me: I was eating lunch with Matthew from Nebraska and Gloria from Illinois, where we had a candid and respectful conversation about affirmative action policies. As young high school students with some stress and much insight towards the college application process, each of us entered the dialogue with our own (and in my case, somewhat narrow) perspectives. As controversy over affirmative action usually focuses on societal discrimination and inequalities, I assumed there were quotas for race, gender, even geography, and so on so forth. As it turns out, affirmative action functions similarly to the more politically benign college admissions tool of holistic review, a point that I never realized until I listened to Gloria’s explanation. I also found Matthew’s arguments illuminating, as he was concerned with the problematic incentives affirmative action

created — for example, if parents believed low income students had a better chance in the college admissions process, perhaps they would begin to work fewer hours or invest less in their children's education. Gloria countered that this incentive was unlikely and punished students for their parents' missteps; many studies show higher income students tend to score higher on standardized tests, an influential factor in college admissions. Captain Mack also pitched in. Given the problems of standardized testing, are there ways to reform the SAT and ACT, or should we just throw out the whole concept altogether? In summation, the conversation we shared was enlightening in more ways than one. Each person gave their opinion respectfully and thoughtfully, considering the points articulated before contributing their own opinion; rather than a debate shaped by inflexible opinions and a determination to win, it truly was a respectful exchange of eloquent, reflective, and varied ideas. And this is, truly, the essence of the United States Senate Youth Program.