

## David Polefrone, MD – 2017

Designing a museum is much like structuring a story. Exposition, rising action, climax, denouement: it's all there. Spatial arrangement becomes paragraph structure, artifacts stand in for vibrant word choice, and lighting takes the place of punctuation. In designing the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, architects consciously chose to begin the viewer's experience below ground, rising progressively to represent an upwards, hopeful journey. During a week in March, a week that I will never forget, I was fortunate enough to enter that testament to America's deep scars and continued need for healing. As Senator Cory Booker told us, the painful past is what may motivate all Americans, and especially our generation, towards the dream of America. In citing the words of Langston Hughes, he reminded us that many still feel that "America has never been America to me/And yet I swear this oath-/America will be!"

Our week in Washington, too, was a beautifully designed museum. At every stage of our journey, whether in the Fourth Estate, sitting before the nonpartisan officers of the Senate, or the judges and justices of our nation's highest courts, we learned the value of promoting inclusive dialogue at every stage of our governmental process. Our week was an uplifting, rejuvenating testament to our country's opportunity and progress left to be made. From our group exercises at the United States Institute of Peace to a night at the National Symphony Orchestra, we saw the value of the human narrative in action. Each speaker and each occasion provided us with a new window into the American soul. This is not to suggest that our week was a static exhibit of the past or present – far from it. Instead, it was a dynamic illustration to me of the responsibilities left in store, to me and to my generation.

I learned so much alongside my peers – but I learned so much more from them. Every single delegate came with personal passions, large ambitions, and unique perspectives. So, too, did our Military Mentors: their commitment to direct public service, and to our personal development, was an inspiration every day. Our mentor, Lt. Dobrow, reminded us that ambition in its best form is not a zero-sum game. Instead, it is a constructive exercise that holds the opportunity to improve society. The connections to these peers and mentors, and the lessons that both have taught me, have left an indelible mark on me, and I will carry this incredible network – in Senator Booker's words, this "grand conspiracy of love," – with me for the rest of my life. There is no group with whom I would have rather spent time in the bright exhibit lights of our nation's capital.

Washington Week will forever loom large in my mind. It showed me one hundred and three reasons why America, and the dreams on which it has been built, will always live in honor and pride. It gave me the opportunity to come face to face with the men and women whom I see in the news as well as who write the news itself. It provided me with the opportunity to learn from the proud history of our nation's freedom as well as the Military Mentors who continue to protect our freedom.

After reflecting on the greatest week of my life, and on the incredible people with whom I spent it, one truth remains in my mind. I, too, swear this oath: America will be.