

Heather Weller, MN – 2017

Even after I have had a few weeks to reflect on my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), it is still indescribable. I don't think that I will ever be able to fully comprehend the experience and appreciate the total value that it had and will continue to have.

One of the greatest parts about USSYP was undoubtedly the people that I met. I'm not just talking speakers here, but my fellow delegates, Military Mentors, and program organizers. Everyone I met was inspirational in their own ways and I truly learned a lot from each and every one of them. I loved getting to know the other delegates and forming close bonds with them. I loved hearing about their varied backgrounds and experiences that contribute to their thoughts and ideas. It's even more interesting to learn how we are all similar with our passion for public service and giving back to those around us to make this world just a little bit better. All of our great minds coming together inspires me to want to do even more to impact this world and those around me. Going back to my rural area where this passion is lacking is difficult, but it challenges me to ask what I can do to change it. Also meeting everyone lets me know that I have a network of amazing people that I can reach out to whenever I need. The Military Mentors are some of the most incredible people that I have met. I have no doubt that they are the best of the best. Having them at Washington Week greatly enhanced my experience, and they are people I will never forget. From traveling to over 100 countries, to risking their lives for our country, they have had some of the most amazing experiences that we can all learn from. Just speaking with each and every one of them encourages me to do what I may not think is possible and to take risks in life. The Military Mentors are people I know I can go to if I ever have a question and I will be able to find an answer that enables me to move further in life. The program organizers also impress me immensely with how much work is put into this program to make it a success. I know that I still don't know the half of it, but from what I do know, I am forever grateful and will never be able to show my complete appreciation.

Washington Week itself was an amazing experience unlike any other. It is crazy to think of all the extraordinary people we got to meet in just one week's time. Some would think when looking at a list of people we got to speak to that meeting the president and vice president of the United States of America would be the neatest experience, but to me, we heard from people with a much deeper meaning that hit me personally. One of my favorite speakers was Mark Shriver of the Save the Children Action Network. His passion gleamed as he spoke to us, and I love people who you can tell care about the things they are doing. I have always been interested in nonprofits, having started one myself in 5th grade, so hearing about the struggles they have gone through and how you have to keep fighting encourages me to want to get even more involved. He told us that "democracy is a contact sport" and that is something I will always remember. It shows that you can't just sit back and watch things happen or complain, but you really have to go out there, go after what you want, and persevere through any hardships. I also enjoyed hearing from the surgeon general of the United States, Vivek Murthy. Surgeon General Murthy was a person who you can tell is very genuine, and I greatly relate to that. His humbleness was inspiring to me, especially when he is so accomplished and has impacted so many people. He was very well put together and he was able to answer our questions in a way that was so respectful and fulfilling. Finally, I enjoyed hearing from the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, John Roberts. Chief Justice Roberts was so down-to-earth, making it very neat to hear from him. I was super impressed by how he showed that he actually wanted to be there and to talk to us. I appreciate him taking the time out of his busy and stressful day to really help us understand his position and to answer all of the questions we had. I enjoyed all of the speakers, but these were just a few of my favorites that I know I will always remember.

Overall, Washington Week itself was an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that has already had a profound impact on my life. Furthermore, I know that I have made many lifelong connections that I am looking forward to expanding upon! Washington Week has confirmed my passion for giving back to those around me, and has opened my eyes to new opportunities that I didn't even know existed! One thing that many of the speakers told us in one way or another was that we are the future leaders here in America and that we can make a large difference. What I believe, however, is that we are not only the future, but we are the now! I want everyone to know that we don't have to wait to be the change makers of America, but we can do it right here and right now. We need to use our voices because it takes everyone from many different backgrounds to make a change! Everyone's voice is valuable, so we need to get out there now and be the leaders that I know we are!