

Ryan Zhang, NJ – 2017

It was a week that shaped my future.

From my first moment walking into The Mayflower Hotel to final early-morning goodbyes, I have never experienced anything so edifying or inspiring as Washington Week. Over seven days, I defined my personal values, learned about our country's political system, and discovered what public service means to me.

At the center of Washington Week were my fellow 103 delegates – perhaps the most accomplished, thoughtful, and committed people I've ever met. Together, we shared our personal stories at dinner tables and debated the nuances of policy long after dark. Each held a distinct background and offered a new perspective; sometimes, we agreed, at other times, we didn't. However, engaging my peers forced me to question my own convictions and understand theirs, while revealing how much more we shared in common than we were different. So many times, I recalled our country's motto "*E pluribus Unum*"— out of many, one. Washington Week reaffirmed within me the idea that we, each unique, don't stand alone; we are part of a whole.

The most thought-provoking parts of our week came from guest speakers, representing all branches of government, offering a host of ideas. Chief Justice John Roberts predicted that the 21st century would be dominated by privacy concerns raised by new technology, while Surgeon General Vivek Murthy spoke about the power of small actions – how something as minute as building a sidewalk can transform an entire community's wellbeing. In a workshop at the United States Institute for Peace, while grappling with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, President Nancy Lindborg reminded us that complexity is not a vice. Oftentimes, clear answers may not exist.

Other speakers left us with more personal lessons. Senate Historian Betty Koed narrated the tales of those forgotten in the Senate, of little-known ordinary people who dedicated their lives for what they believed in, no matter how impossible their causes seemed or how much difficulty they faced. However, for a group of high schoolers aspiring to careers in public service, the most striking words came from Senator Cory Booker, representing my home state of New Jersey, who urged us to recognize our privilege and never forget the sacrifices made by those before us: "We drink deeply from wells of liberty and opportunity that we did not dig. We owe a debt that we cannot pay back, but must pay forward."

Of course, no Washington Week would have been complete without a visit to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Meeting the president and vice president was undoubtedly an honor and opportunity of a lifetime, but walking down the White House halls was simply overwhelming. Standing in the Blue Room, looking out at the towering Washington Monument, with the portraits of John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and past presidents lining the walls, I was deeply moved and humbled by the weight of the president's office and of the history around me.

In the end, Washington Week was marked by faith. Prefacing their remarks, our speakers explained that they took time out of their schedules to speak with us because we gave them hope. After having met my fellow delegates and heard from those who dedicate their lives to placing service before self, I share that hope. After all, the basic framework of our democracy is our citizens, and any citizen, no matter how young, has the ability to make a difference.

After seven days packed with speakers and tours, the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program concluded with a flag-folding ceremony. As famed words our nation's heroes were recited to a presentation of red, white, and blue, they called to my mind our country's spirit – our abiding belief in reason, enterprise, and imagination -- that has guided us through our past. During those moments, I was proud – proud to embrace the principles symbolized by our star-spangled banner, and proud to call our country home.

With Washington Week past, I can only begin to express my gratitude to all those who made it happen. To The Hearst Foundations, thank you for your confidence in each and every one of us. To my Military Mentor Major Jayme, your kindness and professionalism not only helped make Washington, D.C. a second home, but also showed me the best of our nation's character. To the speakers who addressed us over the course of the program, you have reminded me that government is not just an institution, but a collection of people, with real stories and backgrounds, working towards a common goal. And finally, to the Class of 2017, thank you for the memories, ideas, and inspiration. I will remember them forever into the future.