

## Irene Fernald, NM – 2017

I came to Washington, D.C. from Las Cruces High School, home of the bulldawgs (spelled incorrectly) in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I've always considered a bulldog to be a sort of pathetic mascot — a slobbery, panting creature bred to be susceptible to breathing problems. On the second day of the U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP), Senate Historian Betty Koed told us the story of Hattie Caraway. Caraway defied party rules and ran for a full term to become the first woman elected to the Senate. Dr. Koed characterized Caraway as a bulldog — she would clamp her teeth on an issue and refuse to let go. This analogy showed me the power of preconceptions, and I realized that sometimes when you think you have your mind made up, you can learn a new side to a story that changes your perspective.

The people I met, places I visited, and speakers I listened to during Washington Week broadened my perspective on what it means to be a leader and what it means to be an American. It means taking opportunities, considering others, and believing in possibility. D.C. had more chandeliers, marble, and blazers than I thought could possibly exist in one city, but luxury was only a small component of the trip. What made the experience so meaningful for me was the maturity and sincerity of interpersonal and cultural interactions I observed and participated in — in museums and concert halls, on balconies and coaches, in all types of weather and at all times of day.

Each member of the group of delegates and Military Mentors was comfortable contributing their views in conversations. Delegates asked articulate, comprehensive questions and demonstrated curiosity, passion, and wit. I learned from them and alongside them, and I am excited to see what they proceed to do. The Military Mentors were from all branches of the military and all sorts of professions. They shared an aura of calm attentiveness and poise. Especially as a high school student becoming bored with the mundane rituals of senior year, it was inspiring to see the mentors as proof that hard work is valued and can be rewarding if you apply it consistently. Lieutenant Pels was constructive, charismatic, and a wonderful role model to my group.

The USSYP got us very closely involved with and consequently humanized significant members of government. Both Senator Tom Udall and Senator Martin Heinrich attended the Senate reception, where they treated my co-delegate and me professionally and kindly. Senator Udall accepted letters I brought from students at my school voicing their personal concerns about developing immigration policies, noting that some Spanish-speaking staff would help with translation. Our senators encouraged us to go into public service and to give back to New Mexicans. Meeting them made me appreciate my state and its unique, inclusive culture (albeit a little too inclusive when it comes to spelling).

We went on excursions to significant buildings, museums, and historical locations around D.C. and received visits from groups to our hotel. These experiences made me appreciate what is possible in our country: public access to information, investment in learning, spectacular music, and respect for those who have served to protect the United States.

The speakers were compelling and thought-provoking leaders. Despite diverse viewpoints they shared common values of perseverance, determination, and confidence. They discussed international conflicts, threats to democracy, historical events, news, health, and education. Remarkably, many speakers did not treat the large group of teenagers as the future, but instead as people capable of making change and impacting our nation and the world right now. They discussed their journeys to success, the importance of public service, and challenges in the United States and the world today. Many of their messages are applicable to everyone regardless of what stage of life they are in or which career they intend to pursue.

Senator Cory Booker recited Langston Hughes in the Senate Hart Building before running out of the room to vote, leaving us all to reflect on what he had said. I constructed this poem from statements by Dr. Jeffrey Herbst, Judge Robert H Henry, Senator Heidi Heitkamp, Jack Warren, Ambassador Ron Dermer, Nicolas Rasmussen, Mark Shriver, Senator Cory Booker, and John W. Franklin. Their messages deserve consideration.

Tell a story without footnotes.

Don't be passive.

Get engaged, stay engaged.

Be an informed citizen.

If you don't get engaged, you'll have no one to blame but yourself.

Don't think you deserve what you get.

You cannot pay them back. You gotta pay them forward.

Write well, think analytically, speak clearly.

Some people are driven by politics instead of sound analytics.

Don't let rancor take over substance.

Never make it personal. Don't attack the intentions of other people; then you demonize others.

There is a spot where if you disagree, people will feel comfortable saying really mean and horrible things about you.

You can't make everyone in the world happy.

You are not always going to be successful.

When you lose, it isn't fun, but you learn from it.

Treat people beside us with equality, justice, and fairness.

Appreciate how different and how similar we are.

We are most powerful by example.

A few committed people are the only things that change the world.

I appreciate my state for selecting me to represent New Mexico at USSYP. Thank you to the speakers who shared their time with us, the mentors and photographers for inspiration, my fellow delegates for their genuine friendship, and the Hearst Foundations Executives for organizing and providing this spectacular opportunity.