

Emmanuel Berrelleza, NV – 2017

In retrospect, I am not sure what I miss more: the amazing speakers who opened a well of their wisdom to water our curiosities or the eye-opening late night conversations and sleep deprivation that came as a result. Coming from an area in Las Vegas where academics are not a priority and a background where no one has ever left the walls beyond their home – Washington Week was such a breathtaking experience and I am forever grateful to The Hearst Foundations for that. Every day was so jammed-packed which made it very difficult to find the words, feelings, and emotions to express my gratitude. From dining at the State Department to meeting Nevada's senators, I experienced many powerful moments that truly made this a once lifetime experience. I know I will eventually end back up in D.C pursuing public service, but never again with the same smiles, moments, nor laughs that I experienced during the week.

As I mentioned, my week-long experience was, above all else, eye-opening. Throughout my life, I have always been aware of the socioeconomic and ethnic representation desperately needed in government. It wasn't until I experienced this dilemma firsthand, however, that the lack of representation really hit home. I realized that a majority of those who are leading our nation in education, immigration, health care, and all important matters, very few have ever experienced a day of true adversity themselves. Legislation is pushed for quality education by politicians who have never stepped foot on public school grounds and health care reform is debated by men and women who have never lived a day without health insurance. On the flip side, meeting some of our nation's most prominent leaders also made the entire political realm more humanized. The familiar faces we constantly see on television and the powerful speeches made on Capitol Hill are all delivered by people who are also human beings. There seems to be this stigma that politicians are corrupt and power-hungry, but my experience in D.C countered such notions, especially getting to meet some of these influential people up close. Meeting Catherine Cortez Masto, one of Nevada's senators, was such a special moment simply because of the barriers she has started to break down for the generations that will follow, being the first Hispanic woman in the Senate. My selfie with Marco Rubio was also very memorable.

Washington Week has exposed me to the problems that blindside society, such as the repercussions of fake news, and has also provided a spectrum of new perspectives that I had never before considered. The environment in which we immersed ourselves in for a week was extremely refreshing. The 103 delegates I am proud to call my friends, heartfelt speeches, and the amazing events we experienced together all really heightened my own time in our nation's capital. When Senator Heitkamp delivered her words in front of our Constitution and Declaration of Independence at the National Archives, I nearly teared up. When I first stepped foot in the White House, my surroundings felt like they would disappear in moments – it was a surreal moment, like I was dreaming. As sad as I was parting ways at the airport, I felt a new sense of confidence in our nation's future and I was eager to return home with my newfound friends, memories and experiences. This week was definitely one for the books and I cannot thank The Hearst Foundations enough for presenting such an unparalleled opportunity.