

## Lauren Lim, NV – 2017

Washington Week was unforgettable. It gave me more than an inside look of the inner workings of our great nation's capital, but also a glance into the future of our nation. I left Washington Week hopeful, reassured, and excited for the years to come; for the years ahead that I get to see my fellow delegates working as senators with courage and passion like Senator Heitkamp, as nonprofit owners casting a blanket of kindness, understanding, and love over the world like Mr. Mark Shriver, as truth-revealing reporters like Bob Schieffer, or even as the president or vice president of the United States of America. Not only will I get to tell my kids that I got to meet these amazing people, but that I had the honor to learn from them, travel with them, and laugh with them. I have the United States Youth Senate Program (USSYP) for that – for 103 new friends, a learning experience like no other, and a rejuvenated outlook on our future.

I did not know what I was getting myself into when I applied to this program. I only recently started taking an interest in politics and international affairs because of my AP government class called We The People. My main interest is science and my goal has always been to become a physician. So, I was more than nervous going into Washington Week because I'm not well versed in politics and I was intimidated to meet all of the other delegates who probably knew ten times the amount that I did. However, I had no need to be nervous. The best part about every delegate was the fact that we could all learn something from each other. Regardless of college acceptances and future aspirations, no one felt they were smarter, better, or more deserving than another delegate which made intellectual discussions and debates comfortable, exciting, and thought-provoking. I learned so much from my fellow delegates about their states, schools, hobbies, and opinions on current events. The high level of respect for one another and comradery regardless of political preferences was refreshing seeing that even our own senators have difficulty treating each other as humans with positive intentions rather than merely seeing them as a donkey or elephants at war. Dare I say, I learned more this week from a bunch of teenagers than some of the most prestigious men and women in the country, like the president of the Institute of Peace or secretary of State.

However, do not let the statement above fool you into thinking the caliber of intelligence and experience the men and women acting as public servants for our country is any less than superior. Their words were informative and inspiring. They all taught us about their role in Washington but they also shared their story of how they got there. Seeing the amazing women like Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, Secretary and Parliamentarian of the Senate Julie Adams and Elizabeth MacDonough respectively, and Senator Heidi Heitkamp from North Dakota showed me how many more barriers are waiting for women to burst through. Dr. Hayden reminded us that "we are in the march of history," and what we do matters. It was humbling to be in the presence of the brilliant Chief Justice John Roberts in the nothing less than the holy Supreme Court. He reminded us that "people must care and participate in democracy," echoing the witty Bob Schieffer's comment that we are all responsible for our government. He encouraged us to run for public office whether we are a "republican, democrat, or a vegetarian." The common theme that young people must be passionate about making this country what we all hope it to be was threaded through the week from speaker to speaker, and who better to encourage us than the people whose jobs we wish to have one day.

Personally, I was most impacted by Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, because someday I hope to have his job. He reminded me that I can combine a career in medicine with public service by actively advocating for causes that are important in local government like narcotic abuse, obesity, and mental health. His volunteer work educating women about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases in India has motivated me to take action in Myanmar, the country where my family comes from. He showed me that young people can make differences and do incredible things as well as long as we take risks. He advised us to find fulfillment in what we are doing now – short term goals will let us achieve our long term goals. Dr. Murthy told us, "there is a deep well of potential with each person and it is the empty spaces in our lives that leave room to blossom." He was humble, kind, and inspiring. I couldn't be more thankful to my Military Mentor for allowing me to sit at his table at breakfast so I could shake his hand. His story started from a simple beginning, but with the "accident of faith" he was able to accomplish everything he desired and more. I hope to follow in his footsteps to a career juxtaposed with public service and medicine.

If there was anyone this week that showed me how to be a better politician, physician, student or leader, but far more importantly a better human, it was our Military Mentors. They showed us how to be respectful, selfless, compassionate, and engaged, traits that will transcend into any field we choose to pursue. They made this week unforgettable for us. Captain McClanahan would constantly ask “Are you doing ok? Is anything wrong?” even when everything was perfect. Her genuine concern, as well as all the other Military Mentors made me feel comfortable 2,000 miles from home. During their introduction, it was amazing to see all that they have accomplished in their lifetimes, from marathons, education, travels, hobbies, and families. I was in tears twice during the week, when I had to say goodbye to all my new friends, and during the flag folding ceremony when I saw all the Military Mentors standing with an American flag in their embrace. What they did for us during Washington Week and what they do for our country every day is amazing.

During Washington Week I learned to take risks, find and pursue passions, follow the great teachers in my life, and to stay involved and aware. I learned as a woman, there are many more glass ceilings to break through; as a science nerd, there is still a place for me in Washington; as a student, I can learn something from everyone; and as a citizen of the United States, that I am responsible for the direction of our country. In a time where our country is divided, I can't help but see a light at the end of the tunnel. That light is shining because of the 103 delegates I had the blessed opportunity to spend an unforgettable week with. Those 103 delegates are holding the candles that will guide our country out of division to be the great country we claim that we are, because these delegates understand the great love and respect we have for each other and our country and that as humans, we all have the same goals – liberty, freedom, justice, and equality for all. As Senator Cory Booker taught us, we are in a conspiracy of love and the Declaration of Independence only exists with interdependence. And I am confident that I can depend on the 103 amazing delegates to guide our country to shine as bright as all of our smiles that Jakub and Erin captured during the week of a lifetime.