

Erin Sullivan, VA – 2017

“This week-long event will most likely be the best of your life.” I remember sitting in the Mayflower Grand Ballroom and hearing Steve Cox say that sentence. I laughed a little, thinking to myself about how that line is said before so many other events as well. However, something about this program had me believing Mr. Cox before the program even truly began.

I remember meeting the faces that I had seen on social media. Everyone was so real! This was a dream come true. I was lucky enough to be selected to join this program and meet 103 of the most brilliant junior and seniors. As pictures turned into people, I tried to meet everyone in the room. I might have, but to be honest, that Saturday was a blur.

On Sunday, the real action began. We started to do what we came here for: a whirlwind tour around Washington, D.C. with some of the most popular ticket items and people on our schedule. It seemed that each day became more and more exciting. One day we're touring Mount Vernon, and the next we're in the chamber of the Supreme Court speaking to Chief Justice John Roberts. What other program allows for such close interaction with the most powerful people in government?

On Tuesday, I was more than ready to travel to the Department of State. I quickly found that the bland exterior most definitely does not match the glamorous inside. As we walked into the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, I felt in awe. Some of the most powerful people in the world had sat at the very tables where we would be eating! I sat with my friends as close to the podium as possible so we would have the perfect seat when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spoke with us. As we ate, we were able to speak with employees of the State Department. It was astonishing to find that many of them had never been in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, let alone actually eaten a meal there. Not only was this event special for us, but I believe we made it special for those employees as well. When Secretary Tillerson spoke on integrity, I let out a sigh of relief. This speech wasn't politicized, it was strictly based on character. The world needs more speeches like that, and I'm glad I got to hear Secretary Tillerson present a speech like that to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) delegates.

On Wednesday, the highlight of my day was getting to meet the senators. Although I wish that we were able to freely mingle with the senators, it is understandable for not only their safety but ours as well. At the end of the night, we were all almost ready to head back to the Mayflower. However, when a Senator from Florida walked in, everyone perked up. My Floridian friends got pictures with Senator Marco Rubio, and I watched them interact with him in awe. We thought he was about to turn to leave, but he came over to the delegates and took pictures and gave autographs instead. That night was a dream come true! Senator Rubio took the time out of his busy schedule to socialize with a bunch of kids who could barely vote. I think that truly showed a glimpse of his character.

Summarizing this week would not be possible without speaking about our visit to the White House. On Wednesday night, I remember my roommate looking up at me from her phone. “Vice President Pence is meeting with us too!” She told me, and I was over the moon. Getting to meet the president and vice president of the United States in the same room is not a common occurrence. I woke up that morning full of energy although I had only a few hours of sleep the previous night. We were getting to meet the two leaders of the free world.

This was the day many of us had been waiting for, and for others, this was the day they dreaded most out of the week. I remember seeing mixed reactions from the delegates throughout the day. However, when we met President Trump, everyone was pleasantly surprised. I think the delegates realized that no matter how someone looks on television, they are still a person with a heart. President Trump's remarks to us were a polar opposite from the remarks typically played on the nightly news. That meeting with the president might not have changed the world's view of President Trump, but I believe that it altered a few opinions in the room.

Why couldn't Washington Week be Washington Month or Washington Year? One week is not enough. As we journeyed through D.C., I couldn't help but wish we had more time. I wanted to spend an entire day in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I could have talked with Chief Justice Roberts for hours. I wanted to meet every senator personally. I had so many things that I will forever be thankful for, and I cannot wait to go back to Washington D.C. and pick up where I left off.

As I look back on the week, I believe the best part of Washington Week was the people. Everyone had their own story to tell. As I got to know everyone better, I truly understood that these people are what make our country as wonderful as it is. The diversity in so many aspects but unity in others makes the United States one of the most unique places on Earth. I loved getting to know all of the delegates and getting close to many. Getting to know people from sea to shining sea in some aspects surpassed the actual purpose of the event. USSYP has brought me into a tightly knit group of high school students who know they will succeed. What a magical week Washington Week was, in every sense of the word! My only regret is that I couldn't spend the rest of my life living in The Mayflower Hotel with these people, my people. Young men and women as interested in the world around them as one could be at our age. I will cherish each one of their quirky, unique personalities forever.

Mr. Cox was absolutely correct. Washington Week will, in fact, most likely go down in history as the best week of my life. I have made friends that will last a lifetime, unforgettable memories, and learned more than I ever could sitting in a classroom. Thank you Hearst Foundations and thank you USSYP Class of 2017.