

## Mazzen Shalaby, VA – 2017

“This week will change your life. You will make connections and friendships that last a lifetime, have unique experiences you will never forget, and have one of the best weeks of your life.” I have been promised that a dozen times at a variety of events before, during, and after Washington Week. Only once have those words rung true, and that was at the 55<sup>th</sup> annual Washington Week. I sat there skeptically on the first night, thinking I would have a good time but leave somewhat disappointed or unfulfilled like I always had before. Never have I been so wrong. We are limited to two pages in these essays and whoever is reading this should thank their lucky stars because I could write a book about that week and still not do it justice. Washington Week was, without a doubt, the greatest experience of my life to date.

I keep the Washington Week agenda on my desk, and every time I pick it up and look through the itinerary and speakers, I am left in awe by the incredible variety and degree of speakers and activities The Hearst Foundations managed to assemble into one action-packed week. We heard from over twenty speakers in the course of the week, and choosing a favorite is something I have grappled with since the day I left. Amongst my favorites were Senator Cory Booker, Mark Shriver, and Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general of the United States. Each man was tremendously accomplished, genuine, and eloquent. Vice Admiral Murthy told us that “we live in a world where life has to be ‘full’ but the empty spaces in life are what make life great,” something that tied into his overall theme of self-discovery and risk taking, which focused on helping others. Mark Shriver’s genuine desire to help others was invigorating, and one of the most poignant remarks he made was that “democracy is a contact sport” and that it was up to us to get a little dirty and bloodied in the fight for what we believed in. Finally, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey was practically a soundbite factory, cranking out inspiring nuggets of wisdom in the span of twenty minutes before showing off his Division I athleticism by literally running to catch a vote on the floor of the Senate. He represented the younger, fresh new face of American politics and shared with us these beautiful words about how we are one, united nation and people: “patriotism is love of country, but you can’t love your country without loving your countrymen and countrywomen.” Each and every speaker throughout the week had incredible experiences and wisdoms to share with us, and I can honestly say I have never enjoyed taking notes so much in my life. I was repeatedly struck by how many of these people seemed to maintain that idealistic dream of improving this great nation that I hold so dear, and how hard they were working to achieve that goal; in a time when it is difficult to find a single good word about this nation’s government and those within it, it was refreshing to see that there are in fact plenty of good guys fighting the good fight.

The accommodations, the food, the travel and everything in between was beyond luxurious. I have yet to participate in a program that can hold a candle to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) in that regard and I am certain it will be a long time until I do.

It is impossible to pinpoint exactly what made Washington Week the experience that it was, but I think it was the spectacular individuals I had the chance to interact with that really made the week. It was not just the speakers, or The Hearst Foundations staff, or the Military Mentors, or the other delegates, but all of them together. Every single person I had the privilege of meeting was remarkable not only in their achievements but in their person. I had some of the most in depth conversations about the most serious and controversial issues I have ever had, all without the faintest hint of ill will. Accomplished adults treated me as their equal, and decorated mentors of the Armed Forces seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say. I live in the county home to the nation’s largest Marine base, just an hour south of the Pentagon, and have always been surrounded by members of the military and their families. Washington Week showed me a vastly different side to our nation’s Armed Forces than I had ever seen and that I was thrilled to see existed. Some of the most serious conversations I had took place with the same man that some of my most hilariously funny and ridiculous memories are courtesy of: my Military Mentor, Lt. Ryan Vandehei. My mentor group quickly emerged as one of the most tight-knit and I know that I will remain in contact with its members for years to come. My fellow delegates as a whole left me feeling terribly inadequate and wondering how I managed to sneak into such an impressive group. I was blown away by the superb intellect, amazing accomplishments, and remarkable character of every delegate I met. Every new person I sat, stood, or ate next to had something extraordinary to offer and I felt that all I wanted to do was listen and absorb as much as I could from everyone around me. I have never been surrounded by an altogether more impressive, intellectual, interesting, and inspiring group than I was during Washington Week.

Washington Week is many things, but to sum it up, it is quite literally life-changing, and I say that as someone who doubted it would be at the onset. I will forever remember my week in D.C. as a USSYP delegate and will remain incredibly grateful for the experiences I had. Most of all, I left Washington Week

inspired; not only by virtue of the speakers and their words and actions, but by every single person that I had the privilege of meeting that week. I will never quite figure out how I managed to make it into such a group. If Washington Week represents the future, then I am excited and full of hope, because not only are there plenty of good guys fighting the good fight right now, but the next generation promises to even more.