

Mackenzie Hawkins, CA -- 2018

In Service to the Public

Public service, to me, had always been a relatively clear concept: action taken by a government official in order to better a community. Cut and dry. Public servants were elected representatives, their staffs, political appointees, their staffs, career government workers, and their staffs. So on, and so forth.

My view of public service was remarkably narrow, especially for someone who intended to enter it.

Throughout Washington Week, I had the privilege of meeting, hearing from, and interacting with public servants at all levels of government. From Judge Robert Henry, I learned that the law, at its best, is “not the passion of the moment, but rather the wisdom of the ages.” I now try to balance my most passionate moments with the lessons of those who exercised their passions before me. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch told us that “just because you disagree... you don’t have to] be disagreeable.” I now try to look at our national discourse through a lens characterized by civility and conversation.

I remember one conversation distinctly: we were eating lunch after hearing from Senator Amy Klobuchar, and I was talking to my friends from Vermont and Wyoming about free trade, globalization, and clean energy. Based on what I know now, I am in favor of all three.

Coal culture is foreign to me. I, rather naively, thought that job retraining with an emphasis on moving towards sustainable energy would provide a reasonable solution for the very real ills caused by free trade and our coal dependence. In talking with my fellow delegates, I came to appreciate that the politics of rural Wyoming are the result of a way of life that I simply don’t understand. One in which coal is - very reasonably - not just an industry, but a livelihood. In a conversation that evolved from international economics to rural gender roles, I did not find that my views changed significantly on any one issue. Perhaps more importantly, I came to understand human concerns behind an issue that I had seen as purely political.

In truth, every issue in politics comes back to people -- those who govern and those who are governed. USSYP taught me that.

And as important as it is to converse with those with whom we disagree, Senator Tim Scott reminded me that “the most important conversation you will ever hear is between you and you.” It’s our internal dialogue that dictates our choices and the ways in which we approach external dialogue. Democracy starts and ends with the individual mind; USSYP taught me to use mine more consciously.

It is incredibly easy to label large swaths of the country in one way or another -- I know because I’ve been guilty of it. Meeting delegates from every single state (and two countries) proved that stereotypes are such a small part of the story. Generalizations gave way to individuals. Though we come from very different places, USSYP delegates have something in common: we’re all trying to make our communities and our country better. We just have very different ideas about how to get there, and maybe about what “there” looks like.

As Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth Macdonough put it, “your government is a living, breathing creature.” Every delegate of the United States Senate Youth Program -- every citizen -- is charged with taking care of that creature. Former Presidential Advisor Thomas “Mack” McLarty told us, “I feel good about the future with people like you... who will take the good and bad... and make it better.” In that moment, I felt a small surge of fear and a greater surge of pride and excitement. I don’t know where I’ll be in five, ten, thirty years, but I do know that I will carry with me the lessons and promise of USSYP.

If Washington Week gave me just one thing (although it most certainly gave me more), it is a new definition of public service. Rather than action taken by a government official to better a community, public service is action taken by a *citizen* to better a community. The latter does not exclude the former -- government officials are, at root, those citizens who most actively participate in the democratic process.

Yet, public service is not limited to those who serve in official elected and appointed capacities. Over the course of a week, I came to view my 103 fellow delegates as public servants. Not because of their accomplishments, though they’re numerous, or their goals, though they’re ambitious, but because they listen with intention and speak with conviction. I learned the most from them -- about civility, discourse, and regions of the country to which I’d never been exposed. I’ve moved a few times, but have always lived on coasts with blue

water and blue politics. This was the first time in my life in which I'd truly met a cross-section of the American populace, and from it I gained my closest friends.

They've taught me to live loudly and quietly. Weeks later, I watch them speaking on CNN and for civic education panels and at walkouts, and I feel privileged to have been among them and confident in their integrity, drive, and capacity to create change. Hearing them stand up and speak, I am reminded of the times they sat down and listened, to me and to one another.

In essence, the United States Senate Youth Program enshrined the power of the active citizen as an agent of democracy. After Washington Week, I truly believe that public service starts with talking to one another -- in the Senate chambers (in which I am confident some of my fellow delegates will see one another -- just give us a few years) and at the dinner table.

I do miss that dinner-table-style public service that required more forks in one meal than I typically use in a day. Thank you, Hearst Foundations, for those meals and for everything that came before, during, and after them: in service to the public.