

Jaron Caffrey, KS -- 2018

Coming into the 2018 Washington Week, I had read past agendas, watched previous United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) C-SPAN appearances, and thought I had a good idea of what the week would be all about. Oh how wrong I was.

Just taking Monday as an example, engaging with a former chief judge of a Circuit Court, the Senate sergeant at arms and his director of Cybersecurity, the librarian of Congress, the Senate historian, a Supreme Court associate justice, and a United States senator is most definitely a full day. And just these handful of speakers alone would make the trip very much worth it. However, we were able to go to the Pentagon, White House, Department of Commerce, Senate, National Archives, and State Department to listen to so many other government officials, most of which you see on the TV every day, and we had the opportunity to ask them all questions in something that is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It is hard to pick out just one moment as my favorite. From laughing with Senator Tim Scott about the 'switch', to listening to Justice Gorsuch for an hour and a half, to the president informing us of some "big news about North Korea," the list goes on and on. I honestly can't say that I've ever been excited to wake up at 5:45 every morning for a week, but during this amazing week, I can say with confidence that getting up each day was not a problem due to the incredible agenda that filled every single day.

As the outstanding week drew to a close, I recognized that the experiences and friendships that I have made are truly extraordinary. Just to have the opportunity to gather with 103 other delegates, the multiple Military Mentors, and the Hearst Foundations' staff members was incredible. However, throughout this trip we visited many iconic sites in our nation's capital and met leaders at the highest levels of our government. That truly is not something that a kid from rural Kansas gets to do often, if ever.

Coming into the week I knew that representation from every state is sure to guarantee diverse backgrounds and viewpoints on the issues. However, once we all met each other in person, while there were clear divides between policy ideas, we could unite around the respect that we had for one another as people. This shared value of respect between all of us delegates established common ground, and enabled a civil discussion to be held.

Also, I've always held the military in high regard, and have always viewed our service men and women as heroes of our nation. However, having the opportunity to spend an entire week with over a dozen of the best and brightest across all branches of the military establishes an even greater lens that I view our military with. The knowledge, honor, respect for duty, and compassion shown by the Military Mentors in this program are hard to describe. I had the great pleasure to have Captain Jared Smith from Georgia as my mentor, and while we only got to know each other for one week, the lessons he taught me and my fellow delegates represent a much longer span of time, and I am extremely grateful.

The consistent message delivered by judges, senators, and bureaucrats was a message of civility and working together. It is no secret that our nation is very polarized when it comes to politics, but we all can respect the values of others, and through working together and finding common ground are how we move our nation forward and helping bring civility back into America's political culture.

After personally viewing respectful discourse between the individuals who will one day help lead our nation, I see hope for the future. This week was an eye-opening experience that taught me much more than anything you could learn in a classroom. I see a path forward that restores civility to politics. I see a path forward where leaders are actively working with one another across political lines to develop real solutions. This is a path that certainly won't be paved overnight, but I am confident that it is on the horizon and waiting for the leaders of the next generation to begin the work ahead.

The 2018 Washington Week was so much more than what I could have ever tried to imagine. This was a week that honestly left me inspired and hopeful. While I certainly don't have the slightest idea of what things will look like tomorrow, I am confident that this generation that lies on the horizon is bright and ready to take on the challenges that may come forward. And I know that the future leaders of our nation, my fellow 103 delegates, are ready to help change this world for the better.