

Elizabeth Hopkinson, MA – 2018

The term “life changing” gets thrown around easily. Even the most inconsequential things seem to be deserving of this moniker. When it’s applied to seemingly every new app and everything that BuzzFeed has ever written about, the phrase becomes a little empty. This is why I hesitate to call my experience at United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) life-changing, although in reality, that’s exactly what it was. It was transformative and eye-opening and challenging and really darn fun, but most of all it was life-changing.

I don’t think I truly grasped this during the week itself. Maybe it was because of our jam-packed schedule or my severe sleep deprivation, but the life-changing nature of USSYP never hit me while I was in Washington. It was only once I left that I realized how my world’s axis had shifted over the course of the week. When our plane touched down in Boston, I was overcome with an intense, somewhat indescribable feeling. All the little moments of USSYP - the incredible speakers, the three-course meals, the bus rides, the late nights the Mayflower Hotel - accumulated into this one instant when I suddenly grasped how much this week and these people mean to me. Rarely in life do you get to know the significance of moments while you’re still living in them, but sitting in this cramped airplane cabin on the runway in Logan, I knew that this exact feeling would stay with me through whatever life I end up leading. This is what it means for something to be truly life-changing. Before I could fully reflect on this feeling, I was shuffled into the aisle and back into real life; I only had time to identify this feeling as the knowledge of a changed life. Now a few weeks removed from this moment, I have the perspective to really unpack this feeling and the amazing week that led to it.

My process of traveling to Washington was admittedly stressful. After a canceled flight, a briefly considered 10 hour train ride, and an eventual last-minute scheduling, I finally arrived in the capital exhausted and a little flustered. Plus, all the nerves I had going into the experience had an extra day to fester while I awaited my updated travel plans. Fortunately, I felt immediately at home as I stepped into the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. There was a flurry of introductions and new faces as I attempted to fully take in the situation, and my U.S. geography knowledge was really put to the test as we tried to describe the locations of hometowns that spanned the entire nation. From the very first night, every interaction I had with my fellow delegates was driven by empathy, open-mindedness, and authenticity. We each came to Washington bearing unbelievably perspectives, interests, and opinions, but each conversation was grounded in what we had in common. Even though we are all politically engaged, I got to know everyone far beyond their political ideologies. When I look back to everyone I met, they don’t carry labels of their political orientation. I think first of the funny inside jokes we shared or the lively debate we engaged in before remembering exactly where they stood on issues. Hearing about their passions, activism, and community involvement was inspiring and reaffirmed all my best hopes for our generation.

I was especially impacted by the way that young people like us had the chance to learn from dedicated and experienced public servants. I was inspired by the way that many speakers took the opportunity not only to teach us about their careers, but to truly pass the torch to us. Many told us that we are the future. This statement was more than a hollow gesture; through their willingness to engage with us and answer our questions, the speakers showed a real commitment to fostering the next generation of servant leaders. Despite his high-profile position, Justice Gorsuch did not simply deliver a canned speech and talk down to us from a podium. Instead, he spent almost two hours candidly answering our questions on everything from Constitutional law to book recommendations. Senator King offered us his advice for a career in politics in the spirit of preparing us to lead with humility and dedication in the future. At the State Department, I had the chance to speak directly to dedicated members of the Foreign Service who have devoted their careers to bettering the world through diplomacy and understanding. Out of all these incredible speakers, Congressman Lewis was the most remarkable. From the instant he entered the room, we all felt the weight of history, a palpable sense of his perseverance and sacrifice in the face of hatred. He spoke with a gentle resolve, his words infused with a dedication driven by love. His very presence brought me to tears. Congressman Lewis reminded us that our work is not finished, and instilled in us the sense of duty we have to further the cause of justice and equality.

While moments like this will never cease to take my breath away, I also cherish the smaller moments that occurred in buses or dinner tables. The mosaic of these little exchanges is really what Washington Week is about. We debated energy policy and whether there can be such thing as a potato donut. On Wednesday, we shed our power suits in favor of t-shirts and had a blast on the dance floor. My Military Mentor described her pursuit of the best lobster roll on the East Coast. We forwent sleep in favor of late night heart-to-hearts. At the Vietnam Memorial, a Military Mentor stopped us and reminded us of the reality of each name and the lost hero it belongs to. He implored us to remember them as we enter careers that shape both global geopolitical forces and individual lives. With my fellow delegates, I shed the insecurities and worries that sometimes weigh me down at home. We were open and genuine and free to be our nerdy, overly-enthusiastic selves. These stories could fill pages, although I don't believe any words have the power to hold the emotions that accompany these memories. But words are all I have to give life to these moments that now only exist in my head. I think this is the ultimate privilege: to have lived through something that defies language. I'm not bothered by this fact because I know that memories I struggle to articulate are shared by 103 others who will go on to live extraordinary lives informed and empowered by these experiences. So, I sit here and write that Washington Week was life-changing, knowing that this characterization is insufficient to capture all that USSYP is. In some ways, this fact only reaffirms this account, because truly life-changing events always lie beyond the realm of description.