

Morgan Edwards, MD -- 2018

As one who hails from the Appalachian town of Frostburg, a land reminiscent of *Hillbilly Elegy*, I often find myself feeling hopeless, discouraged, and cynical. Poverty is ubiquitous, close-mindedness and racism are deeply entrenched in the culture, and engaging in thoughtful discourse about pressing issues in America and around the world is virtually impossible. Growing up with the aforementioned conditions can make life difficult. Yet, there is a striking juxtaposition in the dichotomy between my upbringing and my time during Washington Week. As I return to my community after participating in the U.S. Senate Youth Program, I feel reinvigorated and empowered with a renewed sense of hope and optimism for the future.

As I sat in The Mayflower Hotel on the 53rd anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” and listened to civil rights icon John Lewis talk about being beaten within an inch of his life on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I had chills. In fact, as I sit here now reflecting on that moment, I still have chills. He told my co-delegates and me to “be fearless in what lights [our] hearts on fire” and insisted that if we “see something that is not just, [we] have a moral obligation to do something about it.” Hearing someone I had previously read about in my AP U.S. History textbook urge us to continue to fight for social change was incredibly inspiring.

While John Lewis singlehandedly managed to turn my cynicism into optimism, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the others who left an indelible impact on me -- my fellow 103 delegates. They are the most engaging, passionate, and intelligent people with whom I have had the opportunity to interact. Seemingly every free moment -- the bus trips, the late nights on the mezzanine, the elevator rides -- was filled with thought-provoking dialogue. The result: My worldview was broadened, my ideologies and philosophies were challenged, and my friendships were deepened.

While the post-USSYP depression has arrived, I enter my community with immense appreciation for my 103-delegate family and for the newfound spirit and zest I have acquired as a result of their presence. They emboldened me to orchestrate a walk out on March 14 and speak out about the need for gun reform in my conservative community, a hostile environment in which the NRA has a stronghold. This is something I may not have done without their support and inspiration. I am comforted in knowing that they are having the same impact on others in their respective communities and will continue to do so in the future.

To each and every one of you, thank you.