

Caroline Baldacci, ME -- 2018

"Washington Week is going to be the best week of your life!" an United States Senate Youth Program alumnus declared to my fellow delegates and I as we sat around a blue table at The Mayflower Hotel together on Sunday afternoon before a very busy week. I smiled politely but, in all honesty, I doubted this man's words. I was frankly exhausted by my long plane ride and overwhelmed by all the information I'd already absorbed that afternoon. Yet, as I reflect a month later on Washington Week, I realize that the alumnus' words were completely true. Washington Week was surreal, inspiring, and life-changing. It taught me innumerable things about myself and our country.

The most important lesson that I learned was that it is crucial to see individuals in public life as their whole selves. Public servants are so much more than what they appear to be like on television. For instance, I learned while eating dinner with one of my senators, Senator Angus King, at the National Archives, that he loves posting funny captions on Instagram pictures. Additionally, because public servants are deeply human, it's important not to vilify them even if they have different viewpoints than ourselves. Meeting Justice Neil Gorsuch made this lesson crystal clear to me. While I don't personally agree with many of the decisions Justice Gorsuch writes, I now have a much greater respect for him. Justice Gorsuch graciously spent more than an hour with us, talking about the need for civic education and civility as well as answering our questions. Sitting in the Supreme Court listening to a justice talk about everything from advice about college to his favorite justices was amazing. I felt like I was in an episode of *The West Wing*. I will truly never forget this experience or Justice Gorsuch's dry sense of humor and thoughtful answers.

In addition, Washington Week taught me that even though at times it may be hard, we must have hope in America. Cynicism isn't productive in trying to solve our nation's biggest problems. At the Senate Reception, my home state Senator, Susan Collins, told me and my fellow delegate from Maine the importance of never giving up. She talked to us candidly about the fact that while she was frustrated when she didn't win her race for governor in 1994, it was even more important that she never fully lost her faith. She told us that if she hadn't experienced that loss, she never would have been senator. Congressman John Lewis also implored me and my fellow delegates to be optimistic about the future. As he recounted his upbringing as a child who talked to his family's chickens to a Civil Rights icon, I realized that I had tears streaming down my face. Congressman Lewis' instructions to "Never give up, never give in, and never lose hope" will forever ring through my ears whenever I am disillusioned about the state of politics in our country. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for making all of this possible.