

Virginia Hugo-Vidal, ME – 2018

When I got an out-of-the-blue email from my guidance counselor that simply said “I’m wondering if you are interested in politics? If so, I’ll ask you more questions,” I never imagined it would lead to the greatest experience of my short life. To a girl from rural Maine, Washington Week seemed like a blessing straight from above. I went from being in a house with no electricity in my upstairs bathroom to having senators address me as their equal. This essay is nearly impossible to write because Washington Week must be experienced to be comprehended, and it is beyond explanation. The best parts were the small ones, the moments that weren’t captured in photos or memorable quotes by distinguished guests. Honestly, for me, the most memorable moment was when Martin Baron walked by me and my reaction was to try to shove my entire banana in my mouth. I could try to explain to you what it felt like to eat dinner in front of the Declaration of Independence next to Angus King, or to cry in front of Susan Collins, or turn around and see Secretary Mattis standing behind us, but those are not what will be ingrained in my psyche for the rest of my life. When I am seated in the halls of power I will look back on my friends from Parkland and their strength, I will reflect on my friend who was almost a Dreamer and his bravery, I will remember my roommate who came face-to-face with Richard Spencer and held her ground. I will always carry the memory of sharing the greatest moments of the greatest experience of my life with people who had completely opposing political views. Only at the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) could a Muslim who’s basically Hillary Clinton 2.0 and a Buddhist Trump supporter bond over their mutual belief that the Vietnam War was pointless and become close confidantes.

The feeling I got sitting in the ballroom at the Mayflower Hotel waiting for my bus to the airport after having been awake for 24 hours cannot be replicated. The feeling of home and family I had the final night on the mezzanine with a dozen other sleep-deprived teens cannot be replicated. I could fill this essay with quotes from illustrious leaders, but that is not what you take away from Washington Week. What you take away is the sense that you are not alone in your striving and ambition. What you take away is the knowledge that no matter how it feels right now, the world’s future is safe and secure. What you take away is the knowledge that you have formed an unspeakably unique and unfathomably deep connection with the future of our nation. Because that is what your fellow delegate are, the future of the nation. The bond you form with 103 other teenagers, plus Military Mentors, photographers, and staff is indescribable and extends beyond the week and the hotel. You will forever feel connected, even to those you barely spoke to.

I’ve been putting off writing this essay because I haven’t wanted to admit that my USSYP experience is over. However, as I begin writing this, I realized it’s not over, it has only just begun. Under the vaulted ceilings of the Mayflower Hotel I discovered everything I had been told would work against me - my youth, my femininity, my religion - would actually work for me. The United States Youth Program changed me on a molecular level, but I’m not sure exactly how yet. I can promise you this though, when I’m wiring my presidential memoirs there will be an entire chapter dedicated to this life-altering and life-affirming experience.