

Noah Harris, MS – 2018

On March 3rd, 2018, I arrived at the historic Mayflower Hotel in Washington D.C. with the notion I was fortunate to be a part of something special. Little did I know, special would not begin to comprehend the rare air I had the privilege of breathing for seven incredible days. The Hearst Foundations' 56th rendition of the United States Senate Youth Program was life-changing to say the least. I gained a perspective on our government most Americans can only speculate from a profit-driven media. Regardless of political affiliation, the officials who wake up every day to serve our institutions do so with the intention of making our country a better place. This program allowed me to open my eyes and come to this realization.

103 student delegates from around the country and abroad as well as myself had the opportunity of a lifetime, experiencing the three branches of our government at the highest of levels. We began with the Supreme Court, the Mecca of our Judicial Branch. There, the newest Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch enlightened us on the tedious, yet rewarding, judicial process he partakes in on a daily basis. Justice Gorsuch was gracious with his time, allowing us to ask a myriad of questions. I had always wondered how the Supreme Court avoids leaks when they are the detriment to almost every other government institution. When I asked him about this anomaly, he said "we keep our circles tight. All meetings are confidential to the justices, so the newest justice takes notes on all conferences." I sensed the Supreme Court is an intimate situation where people trust each other not to leak our country's important information.

Our next encounter was with the branch that initiated the United States Senate Youth Program, the Legislative Branch. We were graced by the presence of Civil Rights activist turned Congressman, John Lewis. I asked this last living member of the Big Six Civil Rights leaders whether or not he believe Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream had been fulfilled. He answered with a reluctant yet inspiring "no, but we are close." Representative Lewis preached I would not recognize my home state of Mississippi even 40 years ago. Just his mere company was incredible. As if that was not enough, I was able to watch as legislation was being debated by the likes of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren on the Senate floor. As a regular citizen, watching them work gave me a new appreciation for our senators that I would not have gained from watching cable news.

The pinnacle of our federal journey landed us in the most prestigious residence in the country, the White House for a visit with the president of the United States. Although President Donald J. Trump is at best controversial, I have the utmost respect for the office of which he presides. Regardless of partisan ties or political ideology, it was an honor to visit the president in the Executive Mansion. Of course, Donald Trump had to say something newsworthy, so he revealed a historic development that Kim Jong Un of North Korea had agreed to a meeting. He broke this news to us two hours before the rest of the world, and it will be the first time a sitting United States president has a meeting with their North Korean counterpart.

Over the course of Washington week, our delegation had the opportunity to witness our democracy in action. We met the leaders of the free world, saw the most beautiful architecture our country has to offer, and ate the best food most of us had ever eaten. Nevertheless, the greatest part of this experience for me was the delegates I was able to meet. I was able to learn so much about the current state of our union from the understanding of two of the best and the brightest from every state, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. Few events in my life do I circle as "life-changing," but this wonderful week certainly changed my life for the better.