

Erica Solberg, ND – 2018

Very rarely in life is one able to mark a specific instance when their life truly changed. This instant for me was attending the United States Senate Youth Program. Having been born and raised in North Dakota, the common attribute of 'North Dakota nice' has always been heavily ingrained in my character. While being polite and kind are always necessary characteristics, at the United States Youth Senate Program I learned that one must not worry for a few moments about appearing 'nice,' when the situation calls for you to take a strong stance for what needs to be said or done.

As a student journalist one of the speakers I was looking forward the most to was Martin Baron, the executive editor of the Washington Post. Mr. Baron was to me a journalistic hero and meeting him was truly a dream. I wanted more than anything to ask him a question after his speech in order to further indulge in the vast brain power that stood before me. I raised my hand a total of eight times when Mr. Baron called for questions and did not get to ask a single question. While a couple of the times the MC, Mr. Cox was on the other side of the room choosing students to ask their question, four of the times he pointed in my direction, three of the times a Military Mentor had handed me the mic to begin speaking and twice I actually began asking my question. However, I was never able to ask Mr. Baron a single question during his presentation. Each time I began to speak another person around me would begin speaking and I would politely sit down. Even after I was given the microphone and began to speak and then another delegate received the microphone after me then stood up to speak, I tried not to appear upset that I had just been interrupted and cut off from speaking. The inner 'North Dakota nice' in me would politely sit now and tell myself that I would have the next opportunity to speak but this was not the case. My desire to be as polite as possible in a room full of confident, self-assured individuals inhibited me from getting what I wanted, the opportunity to simply ask a question. Though I am sure none of them intentionally tried to not allow me to ask a question, my over politeness just allowed everyone to go before me. Frustrated, I sulked back in my chair after Mr. Baron was finished answering questions, as I had not been able to successfully ask him a question. Within seconds of sitting back in my chair, I felt a tug on my arm. My military mentor, Major Wellman took me by the arm and brought me directly to Mr. Baron as he was standing up from his table ready to leave. I saw my fellow delegates begin to swarm around Mr. Baron as we made our way to him and without a moment of pause Major Wellman firmly stated "This is MY delegate Erica Solberg from North Dakota and she is a journalist herself and would like to ask you a question." At this moment I could not believe what was happening. A couple seconds ago I was sitting in my chair thinking about how I will never be able to personally speak with Mr. Baron and now I was inches away from him. I could not believe that Major Wellman had gone out of her way to bring me right up to the Martin Baron, directly through the mass of the other delegates that began swarming around him. As I gleefully smiled and asked Mr. Baron my question my voice did not stammer and my hands did not quiver as I asked it like they normally do when I am put on the spot, rather I felt an inner confidence in me from the fact that another individual, someone I greatly respected for their vast accomplishments and strength in character felt that I was important enough to have to opportunity to be able to ask Mr. Baron a question. As I finished my question the other delegates stood wide-eyed of what just happened and I felt a sense of guilt that my forwardness might have appeared rude to Mr. Baron, however, my Military Mentor's reassuring look made me feel that I was not out of line, but I deserved to ask my question.

Despite only receiving a one-word answer to my long thought out question, it was not the answer that was as important or the lesson taught. After I received the answer to my question followed by listening to other delegates ask their last minute questions I wandered back to my table. There my Military Mentor sat and I earnestly thanked her for bringing me up to the front and introducing me so that I was able to ask my question. Major Wellman told me that she has seen my numerous failed attempts to ask Mr. Baron a question during the question period of his presentation and knew how badly I wanted to ask him one. I told her that I did not want to appear inconsiderate of the other delegates and that is why I allowed all them to speak over me. Major Wellman then told me something so simple but impactful that I will remember for the rest of my life, "sometimes you need to be rude for a couple of seconds to get what you really want if it is for the right reasons."