

Kelly Han, OR – 2018

As I look back at the pictures, the signatures, the notes I jotted down, and the wonderfully kind words left by the friends I made there, I am slowly piecing back together the week I spent in Washington. The week in which I met our president, our senators, and a plethora of prominent and admirable men and women. It is like putting beads on a string; each one is a moment, a memory that flashes back with full clarity. It all still takes my breath away. But now, given time to reflect, I can reconcile my awe with understanding.

Going into Washington, I felt honored and grateful. The only time I have ever felt more honored and grateful was right after. So to all my friends, teachers, mentors, and, of course, the Hearst Foundations, thank you from the bottom of my heart. It was a week of wonder, for every speaker tossed us their wisdom, understandings, and trials as freely as high school students toss our caps at graduation. They laid them out into our outstretched hands so that we could challenge our own ways of thinking as well as learn from their experiences. If I could fill up this page with their insightful quotes, I would. But since I cannot, I would like to share some of the words that touched me the most. From the Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, "Your government is a living, breathing creature, and it takes commitment to make it thrive." From the Sergeant at Arms Frank Larkin, who was previously a Navy Seal and is deciding to step down in order to champion a more personal cause, one of mental health (Larkin lost his son, also a Navy Seal, after he took his own life in April of 2017), "Never take away someone's dignity." And finally, from the Senate Historian Betty Coed, "History is not made of extraordinary people. It is comprised of ordinary people who strive to do the extraordinary."

What also struck me was that they had a wide array of personalities. It may sound funny, but I have always imagined Washington to be a place of confident, polished, and extremely articulate individuals. In reality, there is a wide variety. I am the first to admit that I am not the loudest person. In a room full of people, I do not command attention. So, when I met my senator, Jeff Merkley, at the Senate reception, I was struck by three things. Firstly, I was amazed by the attention he gave my co-delegate and I. Jeff Merkley had read our bios and proceeded to ask about our hobbies. It showed me that even though officials can seem so distant due to the huge monolith that our government is, at the end of the day, they care. That is why they became involved in the first place. This was reinforced when I mentioned that I was also interested in STEM fields. He addressed my worry that choosing one now would mean giving the other up forever as he explained that he was initially intent on majoring in mechanical engineering before he decided to switch majors later on. However, this is most definitely not the only way to become more involved, for it is never too late to take the path of service. Finally, I admired his quietness. I have always harbored the notion that those who are extroverted, or "out there", should be leaders; however, I found a certain sense of strength, truth, and conviction in his quietness. This gives me hope that leaders do not necessarily need to be talkers but rather listeners who care enough about their constituents to initiate a change.

And finally, where would I be if I did not talk about the co-delegates I shared this week with? I cannot say enough how humbled and inspired I am by them. Never in my life have I met people who cared so much about their community and who took the challenge and initiative to enact change because of it. Here, I met captains of their sports and academic teams. Here, I met activists, the ones who organize tirelessly behind the scenes and those who speak out as the face of the people they represent. Here, I met doers. I am honored that I had the chance to get to know them over the week as their co-delegate, roommate, and friend.

I will always carry this week with me as I move forward, both mentally and physically (still working off the weight from the food). For it is truly such a blessing, such a beautiful thing to witness so many who serve and serve so selflessly.