

Meg Jones, PA -- 2018

I have always had a desire to be a part of something bigger than myself. I do not know why or how it came to be, but I know that it has burned inside me for as long as I can remember.

On the third of March of this year, that flame grew a bit brighter until it consumed me entirely.

As soon as I left home that morning for the United States Senate Youth Program, I began to truly feel the weight of the week that I was quickly approaching. I knew that from that moment, nothing would be the same again.

Being granted the opportunity to attend Washington Week allowed me to be introduced to the frameworks of our democracy. Meeting with Justice Gorsuch and being able to sit in on a Senate session brought lessons of my government and history classes to life. To see law and the logic and interpretations behind it allowed me to gain insight on just how intense and rewarding policy formation can be.

I was ecstatic to meet Martin Baron, a hero in the world of journalism. In today's society and political climate, media and news sources are overwhelmingly important, serving as both a means of transparency of legislators but also as a force for social justice. Hearing Mr. Baron speak with such passion about the importance not only of integrity in pursuing a story, but also of protecting and taking advantage of the First Amendment rights so fundamental to our democracy felt extremely monumental to me. To be hearing from such an influential man in a field that I admire so much was and still continues to be one of my favorite parts of the week.

In addition, meeting senators further exemplified just what it meant to be a civil servant. From conversing with one of my state senators, Bob Casey, to being entertained by Tim Scott, I was reminded not only of how knowledgeable each was, but also how each was entirely *human*. Even though I may not have been in agreement with some things I heard, I was able to remind myself that those I heard from were all driven by the same passion for positive change that fuels me as well.

My favorite encounter with a senator happened on Thursday of Washington Week, which happened to be International Women's Day. In her home state of Minnesota, Amy Klobuchar was the first woman to be elected into the Senate. Just listening to the excitement in her voice as she spoke was enough to prove how dedicated and driven she is. Because of my having the privilege of hearing from her, I gained a new powerful female role model.

One of the most rewarding events of the entire week was listening to Congressman John Lewis discuss his story and place in the Civil Rights Movement. Although our time with him was brief, Congressman Lewis's words and actions reminded me that change is not convenient or painless, but ripe with troubles and trials, free of ease and simplicity. He is a champion for the African American community, and I will never forget my feelings towards him. Moreover, I will never forget the faces of my co-delegates and the pride I could feel bursting out of them. I am thankful they received this opportunity to meet a figure so important to so many of them.

Of course, one could not attend USSYP without mentioning the food — the *food*. Each and every meal I had was delicious and, best of all, adequately prepared with a sizeable amount of utensils. The staff did an incredible job not only with direct table service but also with accommodating to my vegetarian diet. Such an experience did, however, have a negative impact on me: not only do I now feel a bit saddened every time I am not served carrot cake after lunch, but I have also realized that sometimes, the Freshman Fifteen does not always wait until you get to college.

The United States Senate Youth Program is one of the few things I would call truly indescribable. No matter how vividly I describe the details or how accurately I recall the quotations, my words will never live up to the grandeur of the week.

Despite this difficulty, there is one aspect of the week I can simply not forget: how Washington Week made me *feel*.

It was in the relationships I formed with so many kind and incredibly intelligent young people—my co-delegates, my *friends*—all of whom not only were willing to present their own beliefs, but also to attentively listen to those of others. It was in the meeting with Martin Baron, hearing just how powerful a single inquisitive and relentless voice can be. It was in the numerous tours and walkthroughs of buildings and monuments

representative of our nation's history and democratic values. It was in the male delegates cheering for all of us female delegates as we stood, unified and overwhelmingly powerful, on International Women's Day.

As I sat and listened earnestly that Wednesday afternoon, John Lewis told us, "We are on are way, but all of you young people will make our dreams come true."

Washington Week gave me the opportunity to meet people from areas of the country I never would have gotten the chance to otherwise, which prompted me to be involved in discussion of cultural and political norms throughout the United States. It challenged me to think just what I value and just what I am willing to fight for. Although I have always been a strong proponent for bipartisanship, USSYP made me truly realize just how dangerous hyperpartisanship is and how important it is for our leaders, both today and in the days to come, to be willing to work towards common goals rather than focus on what separates them.

But above all, the United States Senate Youth Program made me realize that I have a voice, that I am powerful, no matter my size or age or gender. In the environment so fostered by the Hearst Foundations and USSYP staff, voices matter and people are valued.

It is because of the United States Senate Youth Program that I know that something bigger is not something that I will stumble across or land in. It is something I can and will create.