

Kendall Haase, TX -- 2018

Anticipation for the United States Senate Youth Program seemed to arrive in stages. First, as I sealed my application package, doubt prevailed, doubt that I could ever be chosen for such a prestigious program among a multitude of strong candidates. Next, ecstasy, as my principal pulled me out of first period English class to tell me she received a phone call that eventually changed my life. Later I felt nervous, which evolved into outright fear as I watched the intelligent, assertive online exchanges between my formidable fellow delegates. As the week loomed closer, I felt mounting excitement, tinged with apprehension. However, the phenomenal people and experiences of Washington Week very quickly dispelled all traces of anxiety, replacing them with giddy disbelief and enormous gratitude as I dove into the best seven days of my life.

Upon entering the Supreme Court chamber, there seemed to be a collective intake of breath as we felt the weight of the history that surrounded us. *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Roe v. Wade*, and so many other monumental decisions that altered the course of our nation had occurred where we were standing. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch underscored the importance of service and selflessness in his remarks, saying, "Judges should be forgotten. Be a person for others. We're not important." By the end of the hour, we felt less of the weight of history, and more of the pull of the future. We all seemed to feel the call to serve, to impact, to contribute to the greater purpose of "justice for all" that the court system was designed to uphold. I have little doubt that a future judge, and perhaps even Supreme Court justice, became secured on a path to change by nearly two remarkable hours of Q&A in that hallowed room.

When John Lewis arrived in the State Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel, the whole room stood in one uniform motion and began to clap, hard, for this legend that was standing before us. After he spoke, we resumed our standing ovation and clapped with more vigor, because we were no longer applauding a legend, a being of mythic achievements. We were recognizing a man who had seen injustice and spent his whole life fighting to remedy it. In a matter of mere minutes the Congressman transformed from an untouchable idol to be revered into a role model to be emulated. His noble actions were not simply a thing to congratulate, but a standard to strive for. It was evident that he inspired a roomful of leaders to follow in his footsteps.

On Tuesday evening, we dined in the National Archives, a hundred feet away from one of the most important documents in the history of the world, the U.S. Constitution. Despite the solemn prestige of the room, the mood was light as we sat down for dinner. We took turns guessing the future careers of each delegate at the table. We eventually came to the consensus that one would be a senator, one a CIA agent, one an ambassador; we even agreed we were in the presence of a future president of the United States. We laughed at the notion, but not because it was absurd. We laughed with hope, because those grand careers seemed more attainable and more real in that moment than ever before.

All of the week's emotions, combined with a lack of sleep, culminated in a profound final evening. We prepared to return to our home states armed with new knowledge, experiences, and inspiration that will aid us in our common mission of changing the world for the better. Our hearts were warmed as our Military Mentors, looking sharp in their dress attire, regaled us with proud renditions of their service songs. Our hearts were broken as we confronted the end of an indescribably incredible week. Perhaps most difficult was saying goodbye to new friends who became almost family, closely bonded as we were by a passion for public service. On every face, though, the smiles shone brighter than the tears that glistened on many cheeks that evening. And as for whether these delegates will change the world, it is not a question of if, but when.