

Isabelle Jones, AR – 2019

“Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served.” The iconic words of one Mr. Steven Cox. These were the most anticipated words in a week we also met the president. Food aside, Washington Week was truly transformative. It wasn’t simply being a tourist in the nation’s capital, it was closely interacting with the people who run it. Renowned speakers shared their insight, and even let us - high school students, some of whom can’t even vote yet - ask tough questions. It truly was a once in a lifetime experience, as I was exposed to the true mechanisms of our democracy.

In a week filled with some real political superstars, my favorite speaker was someone I had never even heard of before the week. Mr. Brian Kamoie, the associate administrator for Mission Support for FEMA, was truly enrapturing in his presentation, I went from laughing, to contemplating, to crying all in the span of his speech. His candor and genuine enthusiasm shone through and made it really easy to connect with him. Hearing personal anecdotes from situations like the H1N1 epidemic and Deepwater Horizon gave a face and emotion to the response efforts. People who work in Washington do have feelings, too, though it’s easy for us to forget that. His encouragement to “take bold action” was not only something he told us, but something he illustrated in his own life.

My fellow delegates were the real stars of the week. These are the young people that are already changing the world and I’m proud to count myself among them. We are not only intelligent, we are hard-working, determined, eloquent, and compassionate. Regardless of political affiliation, we were always able to talk about issues that typical high school students leave unspoken. From gun reform, to campaign finance laws, to favorite Netflix shows, conversation was always lively. The camaraderie we built is best shown in our wonderful rendition of “Lean on Me” at the farewell dinner. For us, this song really does apply. We’ve built lifelong connections around the country that will definitely be utilized as we transition to college. Who knew a girl from Arkansas and a girl from Vermont would become best friends? It was an extraordinary group of people who bonded over arguably the most divisive entity in our country - politics. Though this is remarkable, I would still place our dance skills at the top.

Washington week was truly transformative. It informed me, not only about public service, but about myself and my future. I am now more determined than ever to commit to a career of service, and interacting with my fellow delegates is the main reason for that. I picked up life skills along the way as well, as we all put ourselves out there this week, making friends and asking questions. All of my experiences and impacts stem from the caliber of everyone involved in Washington Week, from the Hearst Foundations, to the Military Mentors, to the speakers, and to the delegates. It’s amazing all the things you can learn unhindered when the environment is conducive to doing so. I certainly learned a lot, but if there’s one piece of advice I’m definitely going to remember and follow wholeheartedly (or whole stomach-ly), it’s to always “Take the donut” - Chief Justice Roberts (used by Brian Kamoie).