

Megan Striff-Cave, CT – 2019

I can say with confidence that the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was without a doubt the most incredible and transformative experience of my entire life. Despite being just a week long, it was an unparalleled educational immersion into all three branches of the federal government which taught me the importance of civic engagement. It challenged my thought, encouraged my growth, and filled me with hope.

When I sat down at a dinner table in the Mayflower Ballroom on the first night, knowing no one, I was nervous. Would we all get along? But despite our different demographics and backgrounds, we all shared a commitment to public service and a yearning for a deeper insight into the workings of our most revered institutions. Civic discourse and passionate policy debate were peppered into every conversation, whether it be on the tour buses or while waiting in line for a museum. During meals, we would go around the table discussing the policies we were most passionate about, exchanging views on electoral college reform proposals while we ate tacos and evaluating the 2020 Presidential candidates over coffee and churros.

While every meal was eye-opening and enjoyable, one meal was particularly memorable. Senator Blumenthal, from my state of Connecticut, served as USSYP co-chair this year. So, on Tuesday evening, my fellow Connecticut delegate Bayan and I found ourselves seated on either side of the senator as we ate dinner together in the Rotunda of the National Archives together, chatting about local politics and our experiences of Washington Week. After he spoke to us all about climate change and rising college tuition costs, I stepped up to the podium to provide closing remarks. The opportunity to speak to my fellow delegates, USSYP staff, and my senator while standing mere feet away from our country's founding documents helped me believe in the power of my voice.

Among my favorite and most memorable excursions was the trip to the United States Supreme Court. I stood in awe as I entered the Court Chamber, the nine black chairs just feet away. I was standing where history was made – where cases like *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Brown v. Board* were decided. “Social change happens down the street,” Chief Justice John Roberts remarked. “My job is to interpret the law. I don't come to the bench with an agenda.” Hearing the Chief Justice speak about the role of the judiciary in shaping our country is an experience I will not soon forget.

One of my favorite speakers was Jack Warren, the executive director of the American Revolution Institute of the Society of the Cincinnati. He spoke to us about how the American Revolution, though imperfect, was a template for creating change – a template that we must utilize in order to fulfill their goal of liberty and justice for all. His insight helped me realize I have a role to play in continuing the Revolution. This will not be easy, he noted. But I've never felt more hopeful about the future of our Republic knowing after meeting so many incredible and inspiring delegates during Washington Week, each playing pivotal roles in their community and across the country to inspire change.

From Arlington Cemetery to the White House, our Military Mentors were by our side. Each delegate was assigned a Military Mentor, someone to guide us through the week and share their unique perspective on public service. Lieutenant Herrero, my mentor, led our group (the Riveters!) with compassion and a fierce commitment throughout the week, engaging us in conversation about our perceptions of the military. Because of our mentors, I have a more comprehensive understanding of our armed forces and much deeper respect for those who risk their lives to ensure our freedom.

There is one moment from this week that I know I will remember for the rest of my life. On the very first night, I met a girl named SK. We were from different parts of the country, practiced different religions, and held different beliefs – but we clicked instantly. Throughout Washington Week, SK and I were constantly learning from one another, leaving no topic undiscussed. Through explaining how her religious beliefs influenced her political views, she challenged me to listen, learn and grow. She taught me that we can disagree without being disagreeable. Most importantly, she taught me that when we operate under the assumption that public servants have good intentions at heart, we will begin to see that we have so much more in common than we believe. So when Brian Lamb from C-SPAN came for the Student Town Hall and asked us, “Who was the most influential person you met this week,” I immediately thought of SK. When other delegates discussed Chief Justice John Roberts and the other incredible public servants we had met, I began to think I misinterpreted the question. But SK turned to me and said, “You were the first person I thought of!” That snapshot defines Washington Week for me.

Our last night together was bittersweet. After all of the delegates sang our teary and off-key rendition of “Lean on Me,” my friends and I stayed up all night together in the lounge, spending our final moments together talking and laughing and dancing until it was finally time to go to the airport. It was a sad ending. But it was a new beginning. The beginning of a renewed commitment to public service. After Washington Week, I’m beginning to understand what America is. It is an idea. It is a call to action. It is standing up for what you believe in.

I am so grateful to every individual who made the United States Senate Youth Program possible. This program taught me the importance of serving my country with honor and leading with compassion. This program taught me the dialogue and debate are something to embrace, not bypass. This program taught me that our government is not one massive institution, it is a body composed of individuals all working towards a common purpose: building a more perfect union. I cannot wait to work with my fellow delegates to serve the public, and constantly strive to make our great nation “more perfect.”