

Allen Duggar, LA – 2019

The drawling southern, curt mid-Atlantic, and meandering western accents all seem to create a certain harmony when raised in a common goal. In this case the goal was to learn as much as possible from the speakers, officials, and mentors to hopefully improve ourselves, our communities, and our nation. Often the harmony that was formed was like jazz, dissonant, but somehow still beautiful. From the roar of debate came a new understanding for me. Each side and each voice raised a perspective worthy of consideration even when they were at odds.

The speakers were terrific, but it was because they kindled the debate amongst the delegates. Whether it was an expression of awe as we left the Supreme Court Chambers or passionate disagreement with the policy stance of the speaker, there was always a vigorous discussion as we got on the bus or sat in the Grand Ballroom. There was always a hot take flying around the room.

Being a part of these conversations was the most meaningful part of my Washington Week experience. I had the privilege to meet some truly brilliant people from all around the country. If I learned anything, it was that one's own experience is not enough to understand an issue. The diversity of experience in this country is so pronounced, that my limited worldview can never come close to encapsulating it all. Luckily, programs such as the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) allow people to come together and share their experiences whether they are from urban Massachusetts or rural Wyoming. I did my best to pick up a little of each perspective to inform and deepen my own, and that insight is the most important thing I gained from my time at USSYP.

The Military Mentors were also key to my overall experience. Captain Lida taught me a lot in just that one week by leading by example. He always had his things in order, he was always on time, and he always treated everyone with the utmost respect. When I examine myself, I find that I do not always exemplify those qualities as much as I would like, but Captain Lida gives me an excellent example to follow. Their leadership enriched my experience and offered yet another opportunity for me to learn and grow when I left Washington.

Of course, an essential element of Washington Week is the city itself. Being a politically active person who had never been to Washington, even just walking among those monuments struck me with awe. I frequently found myself speechless at the sight of buildings I had seen only on the news or in the *West Wing*. The grandeur of the city helped express the sheer power of our democracy. The history of a plucky upstart rebellion against the British to a republic to being burned in the War of 1812, only to be rebuilt even greater emphasized the strength that people bring out when they work together.

It's safe to say that Washington Week was the single most profound experience of my life. It is a time I hope to cherish my entire life. I learned so much from the speakers, Military Mentors, and my peers. I got the rare chance to experience the rich diversity of the people of this great nation. I find myself often isolated in my middle class, white life, but I relish anytime I can break out of it. Washington Week gave me the opportunity to do so in the company of some of the country's most influential leaders and highest achieving students. It is my sincere hope that each of my fellow delegates and myself are able to use this experience to improve our nation, because cooperation is the only successful future I see.