

Sarah Katherine McCallum, LA – 2019

More than any other feeling, Washington Week left me with a sense of hope. Hope that the next generation of American lawmakers are going to be innovators, caretakers, and peacemakers. Hope that despite seemingly insurmountable differences in religion, culture, and opinion, we can check these things at the door in order to engage in *civil* debate that will be the only way to solve the problems currently facing our nation. I think Parliamentarian of the Senate Elizabeth MacDonough put it best by saying that our government is “living and breathing” and that it “requires caretakers” in order to survive. I truly believe that my fellow delegates and I are the next generation of leaders who will be caring for and cultivating the government so that it best serves the people it governs.

I cannot wait to serve on the same side and across the aisle with my fellow United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) delegates. I agree with Senator Blumenthal’s ideas on climate change in that just because we haven’t become a green nation yet doesn’t mean we won’t in the future. After all, Senator Blumenthal pointed out that in the early 60’s President Kennedy said we would put a man on the moon with nowhere near the technological advancements we currently have for fixing climate change. Senator Blumenthal’s words not only apply to saving our environment, but also to all issues facing our nation.

I could go on and on about the eloquent speakers that we had the honor to hear; however, that is not what sets the United States Senate Youth Program apart. For me, what made Washington Week one of the most life-changing weeks of my life were my fellow delegates. I connected with students who share beliefs almost identical to my own, but more importantly I got to discuss difficult issues with delegates who held views in opposition to my own. I know that this is an experience shared by many of my fellow delegates, and I think is best illustrated in a brief story.

On the first day of Washington Week, I met one of the delegates from Connecticut, named Megan. We immediately clicked and began to talk about everything from Taylor Swift to politics, and it eventually came up that I was Christian and that she was a Unitarian Universalist. At first, I was worried that this discovery would somehow close the young flower bud of our quickly developing friendship, because I have had experiences before where my faith has caused others to dismiss me and end any potential friendship. But, somehow the conversation never stopped flowing. Throughout the course of USSYP, Megan challenged me with difficult questions about topics such as abortion and climate change, and every time I answered she always seemed to genuinely want to hear what I had to say. In return, I offered my own complex questions that I genuinely wanted her perspective about. On the last day, Brian Lamb was hosting the C-SPAN student Town Hall. One of his first questions was “Who has been the most influential person you met this week?” In retrospect, someone such as Chief Justice Roberts (who I was totally starstruck to be in the presence of) should have come to mind first, but they didn’t. Megan did. I turned to Megan, and told her that I had obviously misinterpreted the question, because my first thought was her. She pointed with her pen to her notebook, and I saw that she had written the question with me as the answer, too.

Thank you USSYP for showing me that we are so much more than what sets us apart. And, that our differences, through civil discussion and compromise, are what make us able to create and initiate lasting positive change in our world.