

I'd never experienced being "starstruck" before I went to Washington, D.C. on March 8 for the US Senate Youth Program. The program is an annual, week-long glamor tour of Washington, hosted by the Hearst Foundation. They select two delegates from each state, the District of Columbia, and overseas military bases, for a \$5,000 scholarship and a week touring the nation's capital.

The focus of the program is serious: to educate young leaders about public service in the three branches of our government--executive, legislative, and judicial. Throughout the course of the week we met exclusively with leaders from all three of those branches, it was like getting VIP passes to the Oscars, but for government nerds.

On Monday, March 10, we were able to meet with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Listening to him speak was one of the biggest highlights of the week for me. I swear, we made eye contact a few times. He gave us about an hour of question and answer and was very straight forward. He was willing to discuss any of his opinions about contentious Supreme Court cases, such as *Roe v. Wade*, and he imparted his wisdom to us. His final words to us were, "everything you do, do perfectly, because lightning may strike." It was a lesson I appreciated because it is one I have found to be true. Although perfection cannot be obtained, striving for it requires discipline, determination, and strong character--all of which are worthy attributes.

That evening, I also received the opportunity to have a personal meeting with a member of the legislative branch. Senator Jon Tester was the Democratic co-chair of the Senate Youth Program this year, and came to speak to us at dinner Monday evening. The other delegate from Montana, Rachel Skaar, and I were invited to eat with him at dinner.

Senator Tester is an approachable man, and he reminded me of home--which I suppose is a very good thing, considering he represents us. After he spoke in front of the group, his laid back personality made him a star among everyone in the room; many of the other delegates complimented Rachel and I on our "great senator." He imparted wisdom to us that was very different from, but probably just as important as, Justice Scalia's. "Never shake hands with a meat grinder," he chuckled as he held up his left hand with its two remaining fingers.

Of course, the crown jewel of our week was meeting with President Obama on Thursday. We met him in the East Wing, after a short tour of a few of the parlors and dining rooms in the White House. We were posed for a picture against the wall of the big room in the East Wing, waiting. A few times, we would see a shadow on the wall in the hallway across from us, silence ourselves, thinking it was the President, and collectively exhale when we realized it was just one of the White House staff. The anticipation was high, and I thought several of the people around me were going to pass out.

It was strange when he did come in. There he was, the leader of the free world, the commander-in-chief, about a foot taller than me, thinner than he looks on TV, and standing just a few feet away without a podium in front of him. Just like a regular human being. He talked with us for a while and took a photo. His wisdom was also very good, and was something I have found to be true. "Hard work does not always equal success immediately," he said. "But it does reward you, that's why you all are here."

While the three speakers I already mentioned were probably the pinnacles of the program, there were a few other instances that my description would not be complete without.

Being in the White House itself was an incredible feeling. Everything I touched or looked at have also been touched or looked at by great presidents. I especially loved the portraits of all of the presidents; I teared up a little when I saw the one of Ronald Reagan, and the one of Abraham Lincoln is breathtaking.

I also loved our Tuesday night dinner, which we ate at the rotunda of the National Archives. I ate chocolate cake only a few feet away from the Bill of Rights, and I will brag about it for the rest of my life.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the great connections I made with the other delegates and the military mentors who chaperoned us. The most incredible part of my trip was the fact that I was joined by 103 people who compelled me to develop and articulate my opinions, who challenged me into passionate arguments and then had me in tears of laughter the next minute. They were people who fed not only my interest in American government, but in the world. After coming home, I felt emboldened and encouraged, and ready to continue down the road I'm on.