

Paige Morrison, DE – 2015

You never really expect that one week is going to change your life. You cannot begin to grasp what the United States Senate Youth Program experience will be like until you are living it, and even an entire month afterwards, you will be left in awe. I remember the first time I looked up the program after seeing a friend from school tagged in his year's Obama picture on Facebook. That night I thought, "Maybe that could be me someday." And I remember how nerve-wracking taking the test was, followed by weeks spent waiting to find out if I got an interview spot. Most of all I remember crying once my letter from the Hearst Foundations came in the mail. I did not yet truly realize what I was in for, but I was excited nonetheless. This excitement only grew.

Actually experiencing Washington Week was a dream come true. From the moment I first set foot in Union Station and met some of my fellow delegates for the first time, I felt as though I belonged. At the mixer, this feeling intensified. There I stood, in what was perhaps the most gorgeous hotel I had ever seen, surrounded by brilliant and inspiring students from across the country. Everyone was so nice, welcoming, and passionate. While it may have been a bit overwhelming to be around so many amazing people, I quickly grew to fall in love with the group. While I did not yet realize it, that night in the Grand Ballroom I met many people who I anticipate will become my lifelong friends.

The actual week itself felt like a whirlwind. Looking back, I cannot comprehend how everything could have happened in only the span of seven days. Every moment felt so filled with activity and purpose. Many of these instances stand out: walking through the exhibit of the Pulitzer Prize winning photographs at the Newseum and tearing up with my fellow delegates, the somber visit to Arlington National Cemetery and the wreath laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns, President of the World Bank Jim Yong Kim's jovial and candid nature as he spoke to us at the World Bank, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden's sheer emotion when discussing the Challenger Disaster, watching President Obama walk into the East Room and crying because I had never been more excited in my life.

Over the course of the week, we meet countless influential individuals. Each and every one of them took the time to speak to us and to teach us. All of them believed in us. There is no feeling comparable to that of being told by the President of the United States that you are among the future leaders of America. I never considered myself capable of changing the world until Washington Week. And I never realized that my generation would someday make great things happen. After meeting my fellow delegates, I can no longer see a way that we could not.

The moments that stand out the most vividly are the ones that I shared with my fellow delegates. My bus saw its fair share of passionate political debate as we were carted from one amazing location to another. Games of Cards Against Humanity, Spoons, and Ninja made free time pass filled with laughter and good times. I learned about different cultures, even within my Military Mentor group which contained a Catholic, Hindu, and Mormon. During the dance on the final night, the entire group sang and danced together to Journey's 'Don't Stop Believing.' While it may have been unbelievably cliché, it felt fitting. I stayed up the rest of the night with my new best friends, pushing through the exhaustion to have a few final moments with these people who had so quickly and so deeply impacted my life.

During closing ceremonies, a speaker from the Hearst Foundations asked us to repay our debt through public service. I do not think I will ever be able to comprehend how large of a debt I owe the Hearst Foundations after Washington Week. My entire world was changed. As a person, I was molded. This happened both through my interaction with American leaders and with the students leaders from across the country. There was not person I met that week, nor one moment that I experienced that did not help to transform me as a person. Thanks to the United States Senate Youth Program, I am better equipped to be a public servant, an American, and a person. I cannot wait to share the wealth of knowledge I took in over the course of Washington Week going forward.

Despite the overwhelming excitement that I experienced when I found out that I had been selected as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program, I had no idea what I was truly in for. Hands down, it was the best week of my life. I fell in love with the people I met, the places we visited, and the idea of public service itself.