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I genuinely believe that my time as a delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program was the greatest time of my life thus far. Washington Week 2015 instilled in me a sense of patriotism and optimism that continues to act as a source of inspiration to me daily. The week was nothing short of phenomenal. This life changing week was filled with incredible speakers, experiences that left me in awe, and relationships that will last a lifetime.

During Washington Week 2015 I learned more about the workings of the federal government in a short period of time than I ever thought possible. Whether it was hearing about the relationship between the President and Congress from Senate Historian Don Ritchie or being enlightened by NASA Administrator Charles Bolden about NASA and its future, my knowledge was broadened and I learned beyond a textbook. Not only did each speaker inform us on some aspect of the government, but they also offered many pieces of advice. Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams told us, "Remain humble, have a strong work ethic, and be nice to the people on your way up because they will be the same on your way down." Senator Joe Manchin said, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." One of the most profound statements that I heard throughout the week was when Senator Gardner told us that it is hard to hate up close. As my fellow delegates and I discussed our worldviews, heard from speakers with opposing opinions, and extensively talked about polarization, we were enlightened to the fact that as we got to know each other on a more personal level, the issues that we disagreed on did not separate us from building relationships that will last a lifetime - it truly was hard to hate up close.

Beyond speakers, there were many moments during the week that left me in awe. By visiting monuments and places such as Mount Vernon and the Newseum, I truly was able to soak up the experience that the Washington D.C. area has to offer. Dining in the National Archives in the presence of the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Declaration of Independence was easily one of the coolest experiences. Similarly, dining at the State Department was a privilege. The senate reception was another highlight of the trip. I was able to see eighty senators and even talk to both of my senators from North Dakota. Being in the Supreme Court and hearing from Associate Justice Breyer completely blew me away as well. Simply going through White House security and into the White House was an exciting occasion. However, excitement does not even begin to describe the energy in the room as President Obama joined us in the East Wing. While each delegate had their own opinion on President Obama's policies, there is no denying that being only a few feet away from the leader of the free world was jaw dropping and an experience that united all of us delegates.

The entire week I was surrounded by the most incredibly intelligent and inspiring people that the United States has to offer. It was so refreshing to have intellectual conversations about politics and current events with people who genuinely had a passion and interest in the happenings of the world and the future of our country. Through conversation and many laughs, I was exposed to differing viewpoints which reaffirmed my own views, as I respected other opposing opinions. I firmly believe that the people I was surrounded by throughout Washington Week are going to be some of the greatest politicians, doctors, teachers, and overall citizens that this country has ever seen. In addition, the Military Mentors that guided us each day were the most amazing people and were always there to offer advice on each aspect of life. The relationships and connections I made during Washington Week with the delegates, staff, and Military Mentors will surely follow me into the future.

Above all, Washington Week reaffirmed my passion for politics and public service. Through a behind-the-scenes look at the United States government, I was exposed to the challenges we face today, such as polarization, but inspired to know that I was surrounded by people like myself who shared the ultimate goal of public service, not self-service. I am optimistic about the success that the 2015 Senate Youth Program delegates will encompass in the future and ultimately each delegate's impact on our country. I cannot describe in words how grateful I am to the Hearst Foundations for making this week possible.