

Mohamed Aly, OK – 2015

To any average American today, our government seems to be failing miserably. Congress is always in gridlock, budgets can only be agreed upon after critical federal services shut down for several hours, politicians are pushed farther and farther into their parties and away from a “middle ground.” I wasn’t any different; I was also frustrated by the lack of bipartisan cooperation and our government’s inability to deal with issues that seemed pretty obvious to the majority of us. However, attending the United States Senate Youth Program left me with a new perspective.

Just the idea of Washington Week is quite incredible; bringing 104 of the best students in the country (and from around the world!) together to meet with officials most people would never dream of seeing in person isn’t just any old leadership camp. It’s not every day that students can get a chance to chat with senators, ambassadors, White House press correspondents and federal judges. This powerful combination of dynamic young people and leaders in all sorts of fields presents all kinds of possibilities, creating an experience that is truly unique.

But probably the greatest part of the whole experience for me personally was the lessons that stuck with me after attending Washington Week, particularly a sense of optimism for the future. For one, it really left a sense of hope in young people. Seeing all of these students who were able to interact fluidly with leaders from all over the country gave me a strong feeling that we aren’t necessarily doomed... because we have people like Senate Youth Program delegates who want to become leaders. Moreover, it gave me hope in the system. We hear so often about politicians who are mired in their self-interest, but we got to hear Judge Robert Henry talk about the importance of working to find compromise and develop consensus, Senator Joe Manchin talk about using positions to help people and being authentic and acting selflessly, and Senator Susan Collins talk about the importance of being up front and taking action to break through stagnation. This was all a great reminder that the people in the system aren’t necessarily corrupt, that there are still people in public service who have heart and let it bleed through their work - and, more importantly, that we can do the same, no matter where we come from or what our age.