

Kiera O'Brien, AK – 2016

Washington Week Reflection

Flashbulb Memory (noun): a clear and vivid long-term memory of an especially meaningful and emotional event.

Trying and failing to work the room key my first night; standing under a chandelier in my gym shorts; stepping into the Grand Ballroom of The Mayflower Hotel for the first time; dozens of delegates arriving at once on the first day; the handshakes along with the recitation of name and state. These are my first impressions of Washington Week. As the week went on, the little things - the struggle to remember the names of the 103 other delegates, the buddy system we used everywhere we went, the camera flashes, and the amazing food - stick in my mind. My week spent in Washington, D.C. as a delegate with the United States Senate Youth Program can best be described as a flashbulb memory, a time in my life that has come to mean a great deal to me.

The week passed far too quickly, but the people I met there are now some of my closest friends. The late night conversations and shared passion for our country and government solidified our friendships. The military mentors became role models representing the kind of individual I aspire to be, and the speakers changed my life.

Of the many tours and presentations and speakers we experienced during the week, listening to Justice Ginsburg speak impacted me in a way I hadn't expected. As a conservative and someone relatively new to loving politics and government, I did not grow up idolizing her as many of the girls in our group did. I understood how influential she has been to the American court system and civil rights in our country, but what the media could not capture was her tremendous wit. I was fortunate to sit in the front row while she spoke, and I was absorbed by her story the entire time. Listening as she described her struggles as a woman in college, law school, and in her early career struck me because she lived through a time of such inequality that I can hardly imagine as a young woman growing up today. I realized that not only did she live through this time, but she was also one of the most influential people working toward remedying such inequality, and she was standing in that room, talking to us. Having read her dissents, I was surprised by how soft spoken she was, and the unexpected way she managed to interject witty comments into a dialogue about court cases that defined our nation. I wish everyone my age could have the opportunity to hear her speak because listening to her gave me a new appreciation for my rights and a deepened respect for those who fight to ensure them.

"Is this really real?" was my most uttered phrase of the week. I live on an island known affectionately to the continental U.S. as "Nowhere, Alaska," of the famed Bridge to Nowhere. The bridge controversy was Ketchikan's only direct brush with national politics in recent memory. In my graduating class, perhaps 4 have had the opportunity to visit D.C. The United States Senate Youth Program was my opportunity. Meeting 103 other young adults who care about politics and our country as much as I do was life changing for me, and the experience has encouraged me to continue to pursue what I love – politics, government, and law - in college and will most certainly shape my career. And as I choose a college, I'm reassured knowing that I'll be going to school with USSYP alumni from my class, classes of the past, and future classes. And because of this I know that I will be with others like me who are ready to step up, be educated, and lead.