

Serene Singh, CO – 2015

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" And if asked a couple of months ago, I would not have had an answer. Or, I would have stated that I was starting my new mixtape and that an 18-year-old rapper is the best thing ever. However, upon returning from the United States Senate Youth Program, a vision to inspire and evoke social justice in the world I live in has cultivated itself in my daily life. The memories, moments, and minutes I shared with this nation's brightest individuals, throughout this program have shaped the person I have become from the very beginning of the journey.

It was a really warm morning, but for some reason it had just snowed a foot or so. Welcome to Colorado. I was sitting in my study room memorizing the non-existent clean lyrics to Kanye's "All Day," when my older sister said, "Dude, you have a package...some Hearst Foundations?" I am not joking at all when I say I clutched the envelope, sprinted upstairs, sealed the door, slid the envelope to a place out of my sight, and immediately sobbed. Confused, my sister followed me and tried to force me to open the package. Terrified, I made her do the job instead. And if I was already crying of exhilaration, nerviness, and everything in between before, you can concoct what I felt after hearing the good news. The way my mom describes it, "Chardi Kala," which literally translates to "exultant beyond comprehension" in Punjabi, my mother tongue. And that feeling of Chardi Kala never absconded throughout Washington Week, and honestly, will never leave me because of my experiences and memories in D.C.

It was not just meeting the president, or taking selfies with Senator Gardner throughout the week that left that sentiment for me. It was not even just using C-SPAN as my lullaby every night or being requested to not enter the Mayflower gym without proper attire (I came in with a suit and apparently that is not normal). Rather, it was the irreplaceable individuals, perspectives, and doors that had opened my way from the time I walked out of my home in Colorado Springs to when I came back.

I had learned how to walk around in 6-inch heels everywhere - and that is something Brandon, my co-delegate, definitely did not take back from Washington. I learned that despite being the debater that I am, even I could get jumpy beyond belief when asking a question to one of my paramount role models, Justice Stephen Breyer. And I learned that the world is bursting of individuals who want to make change, and conjure collective rightness- we just have to stretch out and find them. Perhaps this is why Major Garrett had said, "People will limit you. You don't do it to yourself." Public service is a realm of life that requires hard work and Chardi Kala. I have come to realize that in finding genuine happiness in service, and working hard for it, the limit simply no longer exists. Yes, Cady from Mean Girls should have recognized that in order to improve her relationship, the limit should not exist. See what I did there? But it is okay because she didn't have the Senate Youth Program to help her out. Shoutout to the whole Senate Youth Program squad. You all are the real MVPs.

My roommate and best friend, Monica Garcia, in D.C. always said, "People who love life, are the best kind of people." And she is right. Passion, after D.C. has become a crucial part of who I am. Acknowledging what I care about and how much I value it has transformed the way I see the domain I live in. I will never forget the advice of Senator Manchin in D.C. who said, "People won't care how much you know, unless they know how much you care." And that philosophy, coupled with Chardi Kala equals a really happy Serene.

The delegates during the Senate Youth Program, even today, remind me on that the way an individual makes change is just important as the change they make. In all my adventures and ambitions, I have found a lifetime of countless friendships built from the foundation of support, excellence, and rich public service. Chardi Kala has an entirely new delineation and significance to it after Washington Week because of the contagious elation and excitement that seeped into every early morning and leaked into every late night. Senator Isakson perhaps said the most important five words that I have ever heard. He said, "Life is all about relationships." And even at

the most basic level, humans are designed to be in communities. That sense of belonging truly came with the Senate Youth Program. Whether it be those who executed wicked dance moves (you know who you are) or those with perfect embarrassing lines on national television (you also know who you are) the overwhelming bliss from every individual present is what allowed me to recognize the veracity behind Chardi Kala. It is not just about inherent and individual pleasure; Chardi Kala is about shared, collective, communal excitement and passion. Chardi Kala is all about valuing and respecting the relationships present in my life. This is exactly what Washington Week had enthused me to do- continually unearth an approach to give back to the society, community and culture that gifted me.

Upon returning from D.C., I have done a lot of reflecting and analysis on my life. In fact, as soon as I got home, I recall asking my mom to give me very unhealthy, fattening, greasy pizza. The Mayflower had treated me like royalty so much so that I almost missed my unhealthy lifestyle. Yet, as soon as I began eating, I asked for a fork, a knife and a napkin. And since then, that is how I eat everything. Even oranges. Even Kit Kats. Okay, I'm kidding. I know the way I eat is not the most impressive lesson learned, but it shows that Washington Week changed me at a deeper level than just my career path or my interests. It sparked a vision and passion for me to become a better individual in order to better serve and represent those around me one day. And so, immediately upon arrival, Brandon and I began planning superlative awards for all of the 100 delegates to enjoy and participate in- a gift from Colorado.

But Washington Week, by far, is the best gift I could have asked for this last year of high school. I gained one of the sweetest best friends who I know will be there with me through thick and thin, Brandon Lee, as well as an enormous family packed with support and relentless love. And with that, I thank you all for being a part of the most incredible journey I have ever had.

When I ask myself the question 'What are you doing for others?' I can answer that the most effective tool I give to others is a spark of hope through my stories and memories of the program. Hope is something that the Senate Youth Program has gifted to all of the delegates - a hope to inspire those around us. A hope to create a society that is dedicated to making positive change. A hope that does not burn out despite the hurdles and troubles that may come its way. I found hope when my Lieutenant said, "This world is full of brilliant people. Find them, stay in touch. You'd be surprised what happens." I found hope when I came home and decided to rap about the wonderful people I met instead of rack city. I find hope every day when knowing this nation is in the hands of the most humane humans I know. I am hopeful, excited, and ready. I am in Chardi Kala. Thank you Washington Week and all those involved in this beautiful journey for giving me a flame that I will always preserve from burning out.