

Brooke Hanes, IN – 2016

Before arriving in D.C. for the United States Senate Youth Program, I would have told anyone that I was most excited to go to the White House, meet my senators, or hear from a yet to be determined Supreme Court justice. However, after spending the week of a lifetime with 103 wonderful delegates and 17 remarkable military mentors, I can say without a doubt that they were the best part. Yes, listening to President Obama speak, eating dinner next to the most significant documents in the country, and appearing on C-SPAN were all experiences I will never forget, but the conversations with other delegates or military mentors that were initiated by all of these events were by far the most meaningful to me.

One of the speakers I enjoyed listening to the most, Jack Warren, was truthfully a man I had never heard of before USSYP. As executive director of the Society of the Cincinnati, Mr. Warren is likely the most patriotic individual I have ever met. While some of the delegates may have disagreed with him on a few of his beliefs, I loved hearing from the perspective of someone who loves the United States and all our country has done for the world, but also acknowledges our past mistakes. Mr. Warren stated something along the lines of, "The Founders and Framers were not perfect, but freedom and liberty had to start somewhere." After Mr. Warren concluded his session with the delegates, I had multiple discussions about what he had said, and I deeply value those conversations. Though I may have generally agreed with Mr. Warren, I was able to talk to delegates that had different viewpoints and opinions, but we were all respectful, kind, and understanding of each other. Throughout the course of Washington Week, this type of dialogue occurred after each of the 20+ speakers we were fortunate to listen to, and it is the experiences like these that taught me more than I would have ever thought.

As bright as all of the delegates are, the military mentors provided a level of experience to the conversations that thoroughly enhanced the week. I was able to sit with and have a conversation with a military mentor at almost every meal throughout the week. Having the opportunity to speak with such accomplished members of the United States military gave me so much more appreciation for what they do to protect the country. My military mentor, Major Breezy Long, is truly one of the most inspirational people I know. Her intelligence, poise, kindness, and devotion to whatever job she is doing, whether that is as an intelligence officer or herding 104 students around D.C., are only a few of Major Long's traits that I hope to emulate.

Everyone I met and everything I experienced during Washington Week has made an impact on my life in one way or another. Whether it was a piece of advice from President Obama that has caused me to reevaluate what I want to do with my life, a conversation with a delegate from a state thousands of miles away that exposed me to a different opinion, or a brief interaction with my senator, all of my experiences have caused me to grow as a person, a student, and a citizen. I am extremely grateful for the generosity of The Hearst Foundations and the dedication of its employees for allowing 104 delegates to have such a transformative experience in Washington, D.C.