

“Wow.”

I have been trying for half a decade to rid that childish word from my vocabulary. With relative success, it seems to sneak back into my diction at the least opportune times. Yet when I was asked by an employee of the Oklahoma Department of Education to offer a single word to describe Washington Week, it seemed as if those three letters were the only way to do my experience justice.

This is because for a week I was a little kid again – a kid in a candy shop. Washington Week was a time when passions met personalities, politics met policy and people met patriots. One hundred and four political junkies, all locked together in the most luxurious of hotels with a red carpet rolled before us.

I loved every second of my experience. From asking senators substantive questions to posing delegates rhetorical ones, there was a fundamental understanding that in every interaction I would come out more informed, educated, and broadened. Yet for me, two moments stand out.

The first happened inside the Kennedy Caucus Room, moments after Cory Booker stole the microphone and the show. Senator Jim Inhofe walked into the room, about 30 minutes after I had spoken with Senator Lankford. Inhofe, a senator for over two decades, could easily have followed the road off taken and spoken to Matt Welborn (the other Oklahoma delegate) and me for a few minutes before he departed to go back home. Yet, Senator Inhofe took almost 45 minutes out of his hectic schedule to explain the arcane elements of Congress and to ask us about our hopes, dreams and ambitions.

The second moment occurred during Washington Week, but over social media. The infamous GroupMe our delegation communicates with was rife with controversy. The latest debate was over our party affiliation playing a role in the commencement speaker address voting. One person decided to delete their party affiliation from their bio. And slowly but surely, everyone followed suit. This may seem small, or even too politically correct, but in reality it represents what is so beautiful about the United States Senate Youth Program: even from vastly different backgrounds and beliefs, we all have a critical respect and appreciation for every viewpoint, and we are willing to accommodate a multitude of perspectives before we determine a position.

These two snapshots of an action-packed week are just tastes of what stands out to me. An essay over all of the impactful moments would quickly turn into a book. But after a month of reflection, one item remains holistically evident: in half a century, there is a decent chance that one of my classmates will be speaking to the class of 2066, whether it's from the White House, Supreme Court, or Capitol Hill. I know that these “wow” moments will remain ingrained in our memory so that we can learn the lessons of our past and create a better future for humanity.