

Jack Shangraw, VA – 2016

To be honest, I spent more time in a jacket and tie between March 5 and March 12 of this year than I had in my entire life prior to that. I love talking politics and reading about government and current events, so naturally I was thrilled for Washington Week. However, I have to admit a small part of me was dreading the formality of the week. I wasn't sure if I would completely fit in, if I would be able to keep up with some of the other delegates more accustomed to networking and rubbing elbows with fancy people. Any and all of these concerns were completely put to rest the first night of the program, after I realized how friendly and funny and open all of the other delegates, staff, and military mentors were. Senator Cory Gardner, himself a USSYP alumnus, said something in his speech to us that really struck me and I have already applied to situations since. He told us "You don't have to *act* like you belong, because you *do* belong." That thought was especially powerful coming from Senator Gardner, because he himself was in our shoes when he himself was a USSYP delegate. And that was a common theme throughout the week for me, having these speakers treat us like we belonged.

Being able to hear directly from these leaders and directly ask them questions was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. What especially struck me about these guest speakers was that they treated us like adults. They weren't lecturing or preaching to us, they were discussing ideas and policies with people they knew were well informed and could appreciate what they had to say. It seems that the opinions and voices of students and young people are sometimes discounted by people in positions of influence, so it was refreshing to see leaders seem eager to answer our questions and just talk to us. Senator Gardner was a great example of this attitude. After his speech, Senator Gardner stuck around in the ballroom and ended up meeting and shaking hands with a huge crowd of the delegates. Now maybe it's just because he's a politician and politicians are necessarily great at shaking hands and being personable. But he seemed legitimately happy and excited to talk to all of us. I remember just thinking how surreal it was that a United States senator was taking time out of his understandably busy schedule to hang out with a bunch of high school kids at a hotel.

As amazing as all of these speakers were, some of the most thought-provoking discussions I had during the week were not even with them but with the other delegates. I know it sounds cheesy to talk about how great and inspiring all of my peers were, but in this case it really was true. Especially when talking politics with the other delegates. Everyone had strong beliefs concerning whatever issue was being discussed, and there were certainly disagreements, but everyone knew why they believed what they believed. That was something that I had never really experienced before when talking politics with kids my age. Rather than turning angry or superficial, all of our debates were civil, friendly, funny, and usually ended up with some common ground being found. This was refreshing, especially in light of the current political climate and presidential campaign, which most of the delegates of every political stripe seem to be equally amused and fascinated by.

The biggest takeaway of the week for me was a quote from President Obama. He told us to "not focus on what you want to *be*, focus on what you want to *do*." During Washington Week, I was surrounded by people who are focusing on what they want to *do*. All of us are in high-pressure high school environments that often focus on numbers and superficiality. But all of the other delegates I was so fortunate to meet and talk to were passionate about whatever they were passionate about, especially government and politics. And if our next generation of leaders are *do*-ers instead of *be*-ers, that gives me hope.