

Madeline Moreno, WY – 2016

In early December 2015, I received an envelope in the mail that would change my life forever. I tore into it immediately, and screamed when I read what was inside. I had been accepted into the United States Senate Youth Program, and I could not be more excited for Washington Week. I knew I was in for an excellent trip, but I had no idea that the program would surpass even my wildest dreams.

From the second I stepped off the plane, I was pleasantly surprised by the courtesy and warmth of the program delegates and staff. Everyone was friendly and eager to help, but most importantly, respectful. Too often, adults write off children as incompetent and ill informed. Yet I never encountered a patronizing attitude or tone during Washington Week. This, in and of itself, was an influential experience — having adults support your dreams, trust your judgment, and believe in your future.

Throughout the week, I was astonished by the caliber and eloquence of all of the speakers. Although I had initially been most excited to hear from the big names in government such as President Obama and Justice Ginsburg, I was pleased to find the rest of the speakers equally as brilliant, captivating, and inspiring. In an age where thousands of Americans are disenchanted with the federal government, Washington Week was a breath of fresh air. Countless times we were told of Republicans and Democrats working together to solve problems, concerned citizens taking action to make the world a better place, and politicians who have kept their promises and changed America for the better. We learned of the dangers of the 24-hour news cycle, algorithms in online news sources that feed you only the perspective you want to hear, and how other technological changes have led to increased partisanship. More importantly, we found solutions to overcome such challenges, and the inspiration to reach across the aisle for the good of the country.

I was particularly impressed with journalist Jonathan Capehart, with whom we discussed issues of free speech, government transparency, privacy rights, and race relations in the United States today. He reminded us of the importance of kindness and respect, as the hateful words of some presidential candidates have already caused real consequences for children of different races and religions. Furthermore, he encouraged us to dream impossibly big, because that is how to make them eventually come true.

The most incredible aspect of Washington Week, however, was not the speakers, nor the tours of astounding government institutions, nor the delicious desserts. In fact, the most influential part of my week was interacting with my fellow delegates. It was truly an honor to share this experience with 103 of the nation's brightest future leaders, all of whom I am lucky enough to now call my friends. My fellow delegates challenged my opinions, opened my eyes to new perspectives, and taught me about government, history and politics. Yet, even more importantly, they pushed me to work harder, be kinder, and be more grateful. I will never forget their humbling presence, encouraging words, or the spirit of camaraderie that bound us into a family. Saying goodbye to everyone on the last day was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

The United States Senate Youth Program was without a doubt the best week of my life, and I will be forever indebted to The Hearst Foundations for this irreplaceable experience.