

John Casey, DODEA – 2017

Even being two weeks removed from my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program, it is hard to comprehend and digest everything that happened. I still look back at that one week with amazement because I can hardly believe I was fortunate enough to be selected to represent the Department of Defense Education Activity. Not only was I honored to represent the school district that has been responsible for my education for the past eight years, but I was humbled to be around so many talented, educated, and engaged students. The people I met at the United State Senate Youth Program are truly some of the best people America has to offer: they care about their society and have actively worked to improve it and make their own mark.

From the first day, I knew these were the students I want to be around. Whether discussing healthcare reform or debating the way our military has evolved and how that relates to the federal budget, these discussions were riveting and insightful. These are not the type of discussions I am used to having with students my own age; it was an amazing change of pace from what I typically experience back home at my high school. In fact, it was tough to go back to my Advanced Placement (AP) Government and Politics class at the conclusion of the program because I learned more from the students I met and the speakers I heard than I could have ever learn from a class lecture or textbook (which is saying a lot because my government teacher is incredible).

I have done a lot of programs with a lot of different organizations, all of which claim that their program is “A Week That Will Change Your Life,” but this program did not change my life. Rather, it reaffirmed my desire to go into public service and serve my country through politics. The speakers I heard from made me believe I could make a difference, and the student delegates I met encouraged me to seek even more ways to get engaged with my community and enact changes desperately needed in our society.

Over the course of the week, we were fortunate enough to hear from over twenty guest speakers ranging from President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence to Surgeon General Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, but the most memorable speaker for me was the Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer.

Ambassador Dermer grew up in Miami, Florida. After graduating high school, he attended the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, which is the school I will attend starting in the fall of 2017. After specializing in finance from the Wharton School (which is what I want to study), Ambassador Dermer admitted to us that he was confused; he was not sure what the next step would be. After graduation, most Wharton students go straight to Wall Street to work for large banks or consulting firms, but Ambassador Dermer wanted to do something else, he just did not know exactly what. Instead of going to Wall Street, he went to work on Capitol Hill. This truly resonated with me because right now, I do not know what career field I want to go into. Especially for someone who likes to have everything planned out, this frustrates me. It was amazing to hear that someone who has made an obvious public service contribution once felt confused. As the week continued and we heard from more guest speakers, this became a theme. People as successful as the U.S. Surgeon General admitted that they did not know what to do with their lives after college. This was truly reassuring. It made me comfortable with my own career confusion.

In regards to all the incredible people we met, the most striking thing for me was how human they really are, even those I might disagree with politically. A perfect example of this was when we met the chief justice of the Supreme Court John G. Roberts. Appointed by President George W. Bush, John Roberts is a typical small-government, strict interpretation conservative; as a result, I tend to disagree with many of his rulings. But meeting him in person really changed my perception of him. When he spoke to us, he seemed like a normal guy. I overheard someone say he seemed like a dad. Not many people can say that about the chief justice of the Supreme Court. As I met with other Republican leaders such as my two Tennessee senators (Senator Corker and Senator Alexander), I realized that these people are human too. That realization truly humanized these people (many of whom I usually disagree with) and made me realize that they people are intelligent individuals who truly deserve to be where they are today.

I found out about the Senate Youth Program from a friend of mine who attended in 2014. I will forever be grateful to Jack Hostager from Iowa for telling me about this program. This was an amazing experience and one of the most meaningful programs of my life. For anyone who is interested in politics and government, this is the perfect opportunity. It reaffirmed my own desire to go into the field and introduced me to some incredible people: guest speakers and fellow delegates alike. I will forever be thankful to The Hearst Foundations for hosting this program, and I am excited to see how my experiences at Washington Week will affect me in the future.