

## Elisabeth McLaughlin, LA – 2017

My United States Senate Youth Program experience began even before I arrived at The Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. and continues today. I vividly remember when my principal told me I had been chosen to represent Louisiana - I could not stop smiling. When individuals in my community inquired about the program and I shared with them the United States Senate's vision for the program and details of The Hearst Foundations' sponsorship, not only were they ecstatic for me but also for my generation. I could detect a sense of reassurance in the future. Later I would realize, those two emotions would define my Washington Week experience. While I am constantly reflecting on the lessons I learned during the week, the emotions - the excitement of meeting the other delegates on the first day, the mounting anticipation waiting to hear from Chief Justice John Roberts, and the laughter shared at 3AM on our final night - remain with me every day. I am constantly reminded of an irrefutable feeling - a feeling of gratitude.

All of the speakers were incredibly insightful and influential, however, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's perceptiveness and his three key lessons greatly resonated within me. Regardless of the daunting tasks that face our nation and the world, he urged us not to be "constrained by the conventional" and to take risks. He emphasized how important it is to not fill every space in our lives because "those empty spaces allow our lives to blossom." Recognizing how important it is to pursue work that inspires you, he stressed short-term fulfillment and finding your most creative self.

The Surgeon General's focus to shift our country's public health efforts from treatment to prevention are admirable. We all must work together to prevent diseases in people around the world and expand our view on how health is universally established. I am grateful for the inspiration he gave me to make a difference in the lives of others.

Lastly, he reminded us how important it is to keep anchors - people and ideas who remind us of who we are when we forget our values and what makes us wonder. His words echo with me every day and remind me what is most important in life - our relationships with each other.

It is relationships which leads me to my next soliloquy of gratitude.

I am grateful to my Military Mentor Captain Williams-Maynard who gave me the encouragement and confidence to step into the next chapter of my life with a strong sense of purpose. On our first night, she gave a speech stressing our individual capabilities, potential, and power as young women. Immediately, she facilitated an unspoken bond between each of us in our Military Mentor group. Her drive, dedication, and resiliency left an indelible mark on us all and has inspired me to live a life of service. Captain Williams-Maynard is without a doubt a role model to everyone she meets and especially to me.

I am grateful for the 103 of the most compassionate and thoughtful young leaders I had the privilege to interact with throughout Washington Week. Walking into the Grand Ballroom, I immediately sensed the palpable energy in the room. Our conversations were refreshing and exhilarating. I am honored to have been immersed into a group of such passionate, intelligent, diverse, and driven youth. Even though we were from different parts of the country, we were able to communicate and share our thoughts with respect and a deep sense of camaraderie.

I am incredibly grateful to the generous Hearst Foundations for sponsoring such a transformative program. My fellow delegates and I were privileged to have been in the presence and to have received advice from so many renowned public servants and journalists. We were able to experience the history of our nation through the exceptional tours, venues, and dining events - all planned with the utmost thought and detail.

In 1962, the 87th Congress passed Senate Resolution 324 with the hope to expand youth's understanding of the nation's political processes and to help young people "become enriched as to what the word 'politician' really means, in the good sense, in America." Hearing from thrilling speakers such as Chief Justice John Roberts, President Trump, Surgeon General Murthy, CBS News Journalist Bob Schieffer, and many more - all sharing lessons on unity, resilience, risk taking, and perseverance - has not only reaffirmed my desire to serve the public but also has given me an unshakable belief in the future. Words cannot begin to express how humbled I am to stand among these students. I am beyond thankful to each delegate for sharing their enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, intellect, and passion to enhance the lives of others. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the U.S. Senate and The Hearst Foundations for facilitating such a rewarding program and bringing us together. Cory Booker reminded us that "you cannot love your country unless you love your countrymen." And how I love my fellow countrymen!