

Anneka Williams, VT – 2017

As I boarded my 6:00AM flight on a cold, snowy morning at the Burlington Airport, I was a bit skeptical about how I would like Washington Week. Trump had just been elected, the United States was (and still is) in the midst of political polarization, and I just wasn't feeling much hope about the future of our country. Little did I know that in a just one week I would gain back motivation I had lost and rediscover hope for the future.

Every single speaker we heard, place we visited, and event we attended had something to offer me. My political views didn't always align with those of the presenter, but I quickly realized that that didn't matter. I walked away from every activity fired up to go home and initiate change in my community. Based on the advice of Jeffrey Herbst, president and CEO of the Newseum, I have encouraged all my friends to eschew news found on Facebook, Snap Chat, or BuzzFeed. I have looked into a legal career after hearing from Judge Robert Henry, Chief Justice John Roberts, and Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, all of whom illustrated the various pathways a law degree opens and the importance of holding government and citizens accountable while promoting justice. I appreciated the life advice Surgeon General Murthy bestowed on us when he reminded to us to take risks, find fulfillment in what we're doing NOW, and to keep anchors in our lives. And I jumped at the opportunity to learn more about how to find reliable news sources from Bob Schieffer, who reminded all of us that "the citizen decides what to accept." It's within our power to question sources and form our own judgments. I could go on about the wonderful speakers, but it would be absolutely impossible to convey everything I learned about government and leadership, and everything I discovered about myself.

While I learned something from every speaker, perhaps the most influential component of Washington Week was the interaction I had with my fellow delegates. As someone from a small, rural town, I often struggle to find people willing to have political conversations. My town is pretty homogenous and I relished the opportunity to engage in civil discourse with people from across the country. Given another week, I think we could have solved a lot of the world's problems. The diverse political views were not only refreshing, but also inspiring. The polarization at the federal level caused me to doubt the ability of high school students to engage with people of different beliefs. I could not have been more wrong. Our conversations comprised Democrats, Republicans, moderates, Socialists, and yet everything stayed civil. It gave me hope for the future – if we can all hold on to the knowledge that bipartisanship is possible and necessary, our generation will catapult the country to new heights.

I always hate hearing students in high school say, "I can't wait to be in the real world," or, "this isn't real life." I strongly believe that as students we *are* capable of engaging with the professional world, we *are* capable of initiating change. Washington Week only confirmed that belief. My fellow delegates are all so engaged in their communities and so dedicated to making the world a better place, there's no reason for them to have to wait until after high school or college to be considered agents of change. Before Washington Week, I had been nervous that my accomplishments wouldn't begin to match those of my fellow delegates. But I quickly learned that they did. In this way, Washington Week allowed me to see myself in a different light and realize how much I have the power to accomplish. I owe that realization to the amazing people I met. It was encouraging to meet a group of people I felt so closely connected to, and while we are all doing different things, everyone has the same goal of making the world a better place and everyone was already reaching that goal.

Washington Week made me reconsider my plans for the future, but I also learned that not having a clear path is okay. Many speakers encouraged us to *not* follow a set path, but to live in the moment and make sure we are always engaged. We saw the many different pathways one can take in public service; a career in any field of study can be used to benefit the citizens of our country. Whatever I end up doing, I want to be engaged, thoughtful, passionate, and inquisitive.

As my flight from D.C. to Burlington touched down, I realized that I was a different person than the one who had left. I had shaken Mike Pence's hand, conversed with Bernie, met two amazingly talented people from each state, eaten a white chocolate Capitol dome, and enjoyed so many more unique experiences. But beyond all of that, I had had an opportunity to see myself in a different light. As I got off the plane, I was no longer "just a high school student;" I was a citizen of the United States, a citizen interested in being active in politics, a citizen interested in holding my government accountable, and a citizen with the knowledge that I can and I will make a difference. As Dr. Carla Hayden reminded us, "We are still a young country... you are going to make a contribution."