

Grace Belize Anderson, WY – 2017

Thoughts and Reflections

March 9th was a pretty amazing day. Not only was it my 17th birthday but I got to meet the president and vice president of the United States.

That was the culmination of an incredible week in our nation's capital. As one of 104 delegates selected to take part in the 2017 United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) – and one of two from the state of Wyoming – I was blessed with the opportunity to go “behind the scenes” of the U.S. government. Going into the week I heard many people tell me that it would be a life-changing week and honestly I did not believe them. I have had quite a unique high school career and I have had many life-changing experiences so I did not think this week would be another one – but I was in for a surprise.

Of course, the pinnacle of my trip was meeting President Trump and Vice President Pence, but the week leading up to our White House visit had so many other highlights, from going to the Supreme Court and meeting the chief justice, to hearing from the secretary of State and meeting our state's senators, to a trip to Arlington National Cemetery and meeting some prominent journalists.

Going to the Supreme Court chambers was a surreal experience because I've always thought about going into law and becoming a judge. Chief Justice John Roberts spoke with us in the chambers and answered some of our questions, and my biggest takeaway was a story he told us about two Supreme Court justices. As they were leaving after a court hearing the one justice turned to the other and said “I don't think we administered justice today.” And the other justice said “It's not my job to administer justice – it's my job to administer the law.” This I found very interesting and really made me think about how I view law and our judicial system. And while I might not agree with this story, I believe this was a real eye opener for me and it made me think about what I believe and why I believe it. I also came away from it thinking law may not be the career for me. Instead, I really want to look into journalism. We had the opportunity to meet Bob Schieffer from CBS news and Brian Lamb from C-SPAN. Mr. Schieffer has been a reporter for more than half a century and has covered so many important stories – including John F. Kennedy's assassination. He told us a fascinating story about interviewing the mother of Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's assassin, and her lack of sympathy for the Kennedy family, which was very shocking for me and very insightful. We also went to the Newseum earlier in the week and met with its President and CEO Jeffrey Herbst. I asked him if he thought news could be reported unbiasedly and he said no, and from what he's seen in news today, bias is no longer how you report news but rather more the selection of news – when you look at different newspapers, it's not so much a different spin on the same story as much as a different selection of what they choose to cover. I thought that was really interesting and insightful. I had never thought about journalism as something I wanted to do, but especially after going to the Newseum and hearing from different people, I think it would be right up my ally. I also love photography, and with journalism, photography can be a part of that.

All the speakers throughout the week were absolutely amazing, but I had several speakers with quotes that really struck a chord in me. Republican Co-Chair of USSYP, Senator Roger Wicker, shared a quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin that I absolutely love, “You have a republic if you can keep it.” And I think this quote is very pertinent to our society today. Senator Heidi Heitkamp said, “The greatest blessing you have aside from a family is to live in this great country – and we have the privilege to see our own Constitution in person,” she stated when we had the chance to have dinner in the National Archives. I couldn't agree with her more. Yet, maybe my favorite quote from the week was from Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer. He said, “At 17-18, you should not know what you are going to do with the rest of your life – that is scary because your mind is not open.” I have never had a clear vision of what I want to do after I graduate from college, and hearing this really warmed my heart and encouraged me because I believe he is so right. We need to keep an open mind and be ready so whatever door opens for us.

We also heard from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during lunch in the Diplomatic Reception rooms at the State Department. The whole floor is still made up of the original rooms, like Martha Washington's sitting room, and it's so beautiful with all the old artwork and portraits. It was pretty incredible that the Secretary of State took the time to speak with us as it was actually his first official speaking engagement in office, and he missed a press conference to come speak with us! His speech was amazing – he spoke about the importance of integrity, especially in political office. He said that personal integrity is something you are born with, you cannot hire, and you can relinquish it, and once you relinquish it, it is very difficult to restore. He also said that, “we are often our harshest critic, cut yourself slack – you will do great things.” He was only able to speak for 10 minutes at most yet his speech had an immense impact on me.

Wednesday night was our Senate Reception – that’s when we got to meet with our senators. I have to say, coming from a small state is very convenient. CBS News was interviewing Wyoming Senator John Barrasso in the Rotunda, and he asked if we wanted to watch. It was an incredible opportunity to hear him be interviewed about the health care bill and debate the reporter.

Another senator that inspired me was Florida Senator Marco Rubio. He came to see the delegates from his state, yet that was not all. Under no obligation, he stuck around for 45 minutes after the reception and shook hands with all of the delegates, and I actually got a picture with him! I thought it was incredible that he took the time to talk to all of us, because that was definitely not something that he was expected to do – he took time out of his own schedule to do it. That had a huge impact on everyone, whether you like Marco Rubio or not – everyone had a lot of respect for him afterwards.

Thursday – my birthday – was a pretty cool day. We got to go to the gallery of the Senate and watch them debate bills on the floor for a little while before heading to the Senate Hart Building, where we heard from New Jersey Senator Cory Booker.

Then it was off to the White House! We got a tour of the White House, which was very impressive and definitely one of the highlights – it was beautiful; I wouldn’t mind living there someday! When we were about to meet President Trump and Vice President Pence, it hit me that I was meeting two of the most powerful men in the world, and I’m pretty sure that I was smiling the widest smile ever – I couldn’t believe it was actually happening! It was an indescribable experience – you feel so important! We had met so many key people already and it didn’t seem possible that we were meeting the president and vice president, yet when they walked through the wooden door and were standing there in front of us, I realized it was completely real. The vice president talked for a bit, then introduced the president, who said we were the top of the top students and he couldn’t wait to see one of us in his position one day – and I am more than certain that his prediction will come true! I got to shake hands with both President Trump and Vice President Pence. I also managed to be two people to the left of President Trump in our group picture!

One other experience that affected me personally would be on our final day when we went to Arlington National Cemetery. I have been to Arlington several times so it was not a new experience but I had always been in the summer when it was usually warm and sunny. This time though it was a little different. It was cold and snowing, and I found myself complaining on the inside about how miserable it was standing outside in the cold, but all of a sudden I stopped myself. I realized that my slight discomfort could not even compare to what our troops have gone through to maintain the freedom of this country. These guards keep the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier guarded 24/7, 365 days a year; that means rain or shine, sweating or freezing, they stand guard. And I realized the least I could do in honor of them is stand in the cold for an hour to watch this ceremony. The appreciation I had afterwards was something I cannot put into words – all I can say is I am proud to have men and women protecting me despite all the pain and loss they have experienced. We are truly blessed to live in America.

Probably one of the best parts of the entire week was that I was surrounded by all these delegates from all different backgrounds. Just being able to have intelligent discussions with all these different students from across the U.S. – and I never felt someone was looking down on me and judging me. I felt like the mature and intelligent young adult that I am and having other equally brilliant and incredible young adults surrounding me the entire time was an experience of a lifetime. I loved getting to know the other students for who they are – that’s what Washington needs to start doing. No matter your skin color or ethnicity or political views, we are all Americans and that is what brings us together. That was the biggest lesson I took away from the week – that no matter what, we are all Americans, we are all people, and I have never been more proud to be an American.