

Brian Conwell, AK – 2018

Today, I showed my Japanese-born mother a picture of myself on the roof of the Newseum. There's a Canadian flag flying in the background (there's an embassy right next door) and behind that the huge, grand rotunda that has symbolized American government for centuries: the U.S. Capitol Building. My half innocently cute, half facepalm inducing mom asks, "Is that the White House?"

Before I go any further, yes, I did get my mom's loving endorsement to write that. My parents aren't exactly governmental aficionados, but I forgive them because for most of their lives they've had bigger things than politics to worry about (heresy, I know). My dad, an educator reared in small, coal-rich Red Lodge, Montana, met my mom in Japan when he was teaching English classes to Japanese professionals, my mom employed by the fashion industry at the time. I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, but that's only because there isn't a hospital within a watery 800 miles of my hometown. I grew up on a small, fishing outpost in the Aleutian Chain known as Unalaska.

Washington Week was my first experience on the East Coast, let alone Washington, DC. I have to say that I'm glad that my first visit to our nation's capital was with the U.S. Senate Program, as it was truly spectacular, one-of-a-kind experience. A short list of my favorite tours would be: seeing the founding documents in the National Archives, all of the various monuments, the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court, the Pentagon, the State Department, and Arlington National Cemetery. A short list of my favorite guests of the program would be: Congressman John Lewis, Senator Bernie Sanders (a hero of mine), Senator Elizabeth Warren (a hero of my mom's), Senator Angus King, Senator Amy Klobuchar, Justice Neil Gorsuch, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Vice President Mike Pence, First Lady Melania Trump, and President Donald Trump.

In Washington, I was able to visit another one of my heroes, President Abraham Lincoln's memorial. Written in strong, grand letters the Gettysburg Address was etched into the side of the left wall. My favorite quote from that document is, "Government of the people for the people by the people shall not perish from this Earth." After I came back to my tiny, unassuming, often unimportant small town in Alaska, halfway across the world from Washington, I realized the significance of this quote. I realized that my proximity to our nation's capital had nothing to do with its accessibility. Our government works for the Japanese immigrant, the public school teacher, and the student all the way in Unalaska, Alaska. Politics is for everyone, and must be forever.

When I showed my mom that picture of myself, I realized how crucial programs like the U.S. Senate Youth Program are to our country. My mother never had an opportunity like mine, and realistically in another country I probably wouldn't have either. All throughout Washington Week, I thought, "I shouldn't be here." I shouldn't have just met the president of the United States. I shouldn't have just seen Benjamin Franklin's signature on the Declaration of Independence. Quite honestly, it was a mix of self-doubt and amazement that kept that thought there. When I came back though, I knew that I made it to Washington, and I should be there, because our democracy needs young leaders to survive. Politics is for everyone, and should be forever.