

Vanessa Strait Constandse, AK – 2018

To say that the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was a blessing would be true. To say that the week I spent in Washington, D.C. with the dreamers and doers of America's youth changed my life, would also be true. To say that I left that week inspired, motivated, and enriched would not even begin to cover it all.

I boarded my plane for the 56th annual United States Senate Youth Program in the early morning hours of March 3rd with a pulsing sense of excitement in my heart. I had spent hours scrolling through Washington Week photos from years past and mulling through myriads of delegate essays, anticipating the week that I was soon to embark on almost methodically— picturing myself shaking hands with the president and even smiling while holding the famed white chocolate Capitol dome in Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. Yet, as I look back at the week that I had put so much forethought into preliminarily understanding, I can now understand how the power and beauty of Washington Week came from its sense of absolute, magical surprise. Washington Week immersed me in an experience rich with people, ideas, and places that were far past any of my wildest imagination.

It is hard to effectively articulate the many gifts and surprises Washington Week raised around every corner. USSYP allowed me to see the politicians, dignitaries, and diplomats that I have spent years reading about in newspapers to become human beings who were accessible and multi-dimensionally fascinating and sophisticated. Whether in terms of Associate Neil Gorsuch's self-professed love of Charles Dickens, Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth McDonough's love of running with her dog, or Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina's humorous recollections of his childhood— these public servants proved to be not just inspiring for their civic involvement, but also for the way they carried themselves as individuals past party and politic.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts Washington Week granted me were the 17 Military Mentors who lend themselves to all 104 delegates as role models of class, perseverance, and ambition (and killer moves on the dance floors). Before this program, I had little military exposure in my life— but after Washington Week I feel like I have gained a new family of military role models, who each and every day dedicate themselves to protection and prosperity this country.

I can honestly say that the time I spent on the buses and around the dinner tables picking the minds of my Military Mentors about everything from linguistics, to patriotism, to college choices, to where to find the best lobster roll in New England, have proven to be some of the most rewarding and impactful moments of my life. As I ruminate on the love and guidance these mentors brought into my life, I am still filled with the same overwhelming gratitude that brought me to tears during the flag folding ceremony on the last evening of the program. Though words may fail me, their impact is something I will treasure always.

Many of my favorite moments from USSYP took place in between, around, and in reflection of the speaker events and robust question and answer sessions. It was those moments of discussion into the lives, passions, and ambitions of my fellow co-delegates where I discovered the heart of Washington Week. I remember sitting around the table during the luncheon with Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, and being brought to tears by Claire from Kentucky's comment on the impact of public libraries in her life. I remember analyzing the napkin-drawn map of Charlotte that Luke from North Carolina sketched to supplement our discussion about school district gerrymandering and public education equity in between plates at Congressman John Lewis' motivating luncheon. I remember staring awestruck up at the crisp, light snowflakes that coated the streets outside of the National Archives and laughing as Virginia from Maine told me that she had seen enough snow, a humorous juxtaposition in the moment of my first ever snowfall. I remember feeling pangs of emotion and swells of purpose during conversation about the future of school safety and the story of an entire city banding together for a common initiative with Stephen from Florida. I strived to soak in the stories of others, and was impacted deepest by choosing to observe and listen to these trailblazers who I was lucky enough to spend meals, group chats, and even pajama-clad nights on the floor of the mezzanine with. Past just co-delegates, I am filled with pride and thankfulness that I can call this network of fearlessly impassioned youth my friends.

The surprises that were packed around every corner of Washington Week never ceased to excite and enlighten me, and each experience — whether as small as a Military Mentor lending me their pen when mine ran out of ink, or as large as the bittersweet hugs of goodbye I shared with my new Senate Youth family on our final morning — changed me for the better.