

Ananya Kachru, CT -- 2018

My first thought about Washington Week: thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you to the United States Senate for hosting 104 eager, passionate high school students in Washington. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for sponsoring us and working year round to make Washington Week the “Olympics of Public Service” (Ms. Guilford). Thank you to every public servant who graciously taught us that our government is more than a massive institution by showing us that it functions through the hard work of driven individuals, who each do what they think is best for the American people. Thank you to our speakers for reminding us that public servants are real people with hopes, dreams, and complex backgrounds. Thank you to our Military Mentors for sharing their stories with our group and teaching us to lead with courage, confidence, and fierce commitment. I am forever blessed to have spent the week with “Wellman’s Women”: thank you Carlee, Erica, Janae, Abigail, Virginia, and Major Wellman. All of your strength and devotion to progress are an inspiration. Thank you to Jakub and Erin for your kindness and incredible photography skills. And, most of all, thank you to my fellow delegates for not only the laughs, tears, and memories we shared, but also the hope you give me. I am beyond grateful for our nationwide family.

In all honesty, I’m not sure I will ever have the perfect words to describe the U.S. Senate Youth Program or summarize the impact of Washington Week. During Saturday announcements, Mr. Cox explained that Washington Week would be inspiring, rejuvenating, and challenging. My goodness, he was right. It was all that and more. The patriotism I experienced during the Presentation of Colors by the Joint Armed Forces Color Guard and The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps is indescribable. But, the intense emotion I felt during Congressman Lewis’ address is not. He reminded us to “do what you can to preserve the little piece of real estate we call America.” Literally feet apart from a civil rights hero, I recognized how truly indebted we all are to those who spend each day of their lives fighting to maintain and propel the democratic process. It is now our responsibility to do so, too. Congressman Lewis further told us to “never give up, never give in, and never lose our sense of hope” because “we cannot become bitter or hostile.” In our current political climate, I feel like we, as a country, do the opposite too often. Washington Week reinforced that young people simply cannot afford anything other than direct civic engagement and to “speak up when something is wrong” (Senate Sergeant of Arms, Frank Larkin).

It would be an injustice to recount Washington Week without mentioning our visit to the Supreme Court, where the most monumental judicial rulings in history occurred. Misty eyed, I imagined the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling and the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* ruling being decided just a few yards in front of us. While in the Supreme Court, Associate Justice Gorsuch generously spent an hour and a half with us delegates as he recounted stories, shared words of wisdom, and explained his admiration for James Madison. Justice Gorsuch discussed that the life of public service involves something larger than oneself. He reinforced that Americans have more “blessings of liberty than anyone else in the world” and as long as we continue to “give hope, everything else doesn’t matter.” I will never forget Justice Gorsuch repeating “you can disagree, but you don’t have to be disagreeable” because “you will never regret being kind.” Regardless of how an individual perceives Justice Gorsuch’s confirmation process or constitutional interpretation, his kindness, candor, and respect create a strong impression.

Visiting the White House, too, was an incredible aspect of Washington Week. An immigrant to the United States at the age of four, I had not imagined meeting the president, vice president, and first lady in the East Room of the White House as a teenager. It would not be an understatement to claim that our current administration typically draws intense opinions and reactions. But again, regardless of political affiliation, it was an honor to be in the White House and meet with those who hold the highest offices in the land. Watching President Trump walk in and call us “a good-looking group” before briefly mentioning his work with North Korea was memorable, to say the least.

These memories are just a few of those I will forever treasure from Washington Week. I am thankful for my USSYP Moleskine filled with scrawled notes about Senator Angus King’s list of *Ten Things to Know Before Entering Public Service*, Senator Amy Klobuchar’s thoughts on female perspectives in Congress, and His Excellency MacNaughton’s perspectives on several “daunting challenges overcome by determined individuals.” I am thankful for our pictures with Deputy Secretary of Defense Shanahan and Director of National Intelligence Coats in the Pentagon, especially the ones including Secretary of Defense Mattis’ brief visit. I am thankful to have watched Senator Warren and Senator Sanders live on the Senate Floor. I am thankful to have met with Senator Blumenthal during the 2018 Senate Reception and shared a pin from my high school. And, I am so

thankful to have gained even more respect for the bravery of our military men and women through interactions and conversations with our 17 humble, thoughtful military mentors.

Perhaps the most long-lasting impact of Washington Week, though, includes the intangibles. I don't use the word "transformational" lightly, but it seems very fitting when describing the U.S. Senate Youth Program. Washington Week permanently altered how I think about and perceive the people around me, the speakers who presented to us, and politics — in general. Moreover, I am grateful to have left Washington Week with renewed hope and enthusiasm.

The end of Washington Week epitomized the title of one of my favorite songs from *Hamilton*: "You'll Be Back." After practically absorbing the "Room(s) Where It Happens," I am confident that our class of U.S. Senate Youth Program delegates will serve with love and lead with compassion to continue the legacy our ancestors built and cultivate the future our countrymen and countrywomen deserve.

See you soon, Washington, D.C.