

Mark Keller, DODEA – 2018

Even weeks later, I still find it hard to put into words what my experience with the United States Senate Youth Program was like. Quite frankly, it is an experience that sounds too good to be true — being able to meet the leadership of our country, getting to peek into the inner workings of our government, and most of all having the chance to meet and bond with 103 other extraordinary delegates from across the country and 17 Military Mentors serving in all branches of our government.

Coming from Belgium as one of the Department of Defense delegates, I found myself largely removed from the emotionally charged climate of the past years in the United States; moreover, I had grown up in European countries where the political landscape was marked by compromise, rather than a largely partisan approach. Events such as walk-outs and senator internships were things I could only read about and most of my interests rather concerned international affairs in activities like Model United Nations and Model NATO. As a result, I definitely flew into Washington, D.C. with some assumptions of what was to come concerning national politics. What I did not expect though, was that across the board — from our speakers to our delegates, I saw a sense of passion and determination in working towards making the country we live in a better place.

Oftentimes some of these most memorable moments did not even happen in the Supreme Court or in the White House, but on our coach rides between events. For every single ride, I always tried to sit next to someone new so I could learn their story. From learning about Massachusetts's educational system to the weather in Michigan, each conversation was a spark contributing to the rekindling of my own American identity.

It was heartening to find that despite the wide range of background and political beliefs we all came from, there was an ever-present sense of camaraderie and civility among the delegates. Just as one of our speakers, Justice Neil Gorsuch, said, "We can disagree, but that does not mean you have to be disagreeable." A prime example of this was during one of our evenings where we found ourselves with some scarcely given free time. (Let me tell you, our schedule was PACKED.) Contrary to what you would expect, instead of retiring to our rooms to catch up on some much-needed sleep, we arranged an impromptu debate on hot topic issues such as gun control, climate change, and healthcare. Of course, there were starkly differing opinions resulting in heated discussions; however, after the fact, all those involved simply went back to being friends. It makes clear to me one thing that is essential and should be promoted in our democracy, respecting the opposition and learning to understand where they are coming from. It is a concept that many of our speakers echoed over the week, fearing it has been lacking as of late. As put forth by Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, people simply need to get to know each other—whether it be at a BBQ or through having your children go to school together. Based off of my experience with my fellow delegates, I have faith we are on that path.

Outside of my experience with the other delegates, I had the opportunity to converse with a wide range of public servants in our country—and I must say my experience with Senator Angus King, one of the two independents in the Senate, stuck with me the most. A career in politics is often viewed in a cynical way, where promises behind closed doors and sensationalist statements appear to define the status quo. Senator King weakened that perception for me with his "10 Points on What I Wish I Knew Before Going into Politics." While I will not go as far as to list them all, his tenth point stood out to me in particular. "Character is above all else; a reputation is just a shadow of your character."

I will say it again; Washington Week was a life-changing experience in many ways. It changed how I viewed my role in contributing to our society. It changed my beliefs on what it means to be a public servant, especially of the necessity of maintaining compassion for others and a drive for improvement. Most of all though, it solidified to me the hopes and dreams of my fellow Americans — of the past generation's and of the future's. With programs such as this one, the next generation of America's leaders are empowered to tackle today's problems and to materialize our hopes into reality.