

Stephen Marante, FL -- 2018

As I reflect on my experience as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program, it would be impossible for me to discuss my time without addressing the backdrop and unique position I faced that week. Just seventeen days before Washington Week, seventeen lives were taken from my beautiful hometown of Parkland, Florida at a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I left behind a city in mourning and flew to a city at the epicenter of a national debate on school safety and gun control. Just days prior to Washington Week, I had the honor of visiting my state capitol to meet with Governor Rick Scott and other state leaders to discuss school safety, an issue that had never been a top priority for me. In the midst of the most tragic event ever to face my community, I had no idea what to expect as I boarded the plane for Washington Week. Nevertheless, as a Parklander, I knew that my role that week would take on more significance.

Some of the most impactful moments I had during the week were from the speakers.

Senator Angus King told us that you don't have to hold an elected office to make a difference- "just look at the kids in Parkland." After his finished, I ran into the Senator on the way to the restroom. In a brief moment where it was just the two of us, I removed from my wrist a bracelet I had been wearing with the words 'MSD Strong'. I asked him to wear it. I urged him to remember us every time he looked at it. He teared up and gave me a hug. I will never forget that moment.

Congressman John Lewis, who was a friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. and a civil rights icon in his own right, shared with us that he had famously marched across the Selma Bridge on the exact same day in history that he was speaking to us. He said specifically to, "Never give up, never give in, never lose hope." I thought that was a great reminder for the young people in the room to not lose sight of our goal to #NeverAgain see gun violence in our schools.

Senator Klobuchar came over and consoled me after I broke down in the middle of her speech that touched on gun violence. The Associate Administrator of FEMA reminded me of the resiliency of the American people after a tragedy. These acts of kindness from people normally seen as figures humanized them and gave me a new sense of hope that our leaders in Washington would, and could, do the right thing.

Of course, there were other moments in the week that were special. Meeting the president of the United States was the honor of my life, and I could not believe that I had the opportunity to ask questions of a Supreme Court justice, the secretary of the Treasury, or hear from the leaders of our military at the Pentagon. It seemed surreal that I was involved in an experience designed to cultivate the leadership of America's youth, while at the same time, America's youth was rising up and leading a political movement unlike any other seen in history.

The most special people I met throughout the week, more than any of the elected officials, were the 103 other delegates I shared my week with. They are the smartest, most ambitious, and talented people I have met. I felt honored to have personally touched the hearts of each delegate with stories from my hometown. I hope that experience challenges them, and makes them better policy makers and influencers one day. I cannot wait to see what the future holds for them, and for all the youth of the United States of America.