

James Gulick, IL – 2018

Since my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), many people have asked me to describe Washington Week. I have tried to think of the appropriate words: amazing, exhilarating, and inspiring come to mind. However, I have found that this experience cannot be described in one word. In fact, it is hard to describe the impact this program has had on me at all. I have found that one particular phrase has encapsulated how I feel about my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program: the best week of my life.

At Washington Week, I had the opportunity to learn in many ways; from enlightening speakers who work at the highest levels of government to thought-provoking tours of historical sites to accomplished, talented delegates who had unique perspectives, I had the opportunity to learn an immeasurable amount about my country, my peers, and myself in a short period of just one week. The jam-packed schedule of Washington Week made this possible, and I would not trade that week for anything—even if that meant getting only a few hours of sleep each night.

One of my favorite experiences of the week was at the Supreme Court of the United States. Sitting in the Supreme Court chambers is something that I will never forget. I was in the same room where segregation was ruled unconstitutional in schools, where the outcome of the 2000 election was decided, and where same-sex marriage was made available in all 50 states. Such a historic occasion was matched by a justice who cared a lot about history. Justice Gorsuch's words of wisdom will be one of the many things I remember about Washington Week. He advised us to be civil with one another and be deliberate in what we want to do. Talking to Justice Gorsuch about everything from constitutional interpretation to Charles Dickens allowed me to understand that many of the officials in the government are people just like the rest of us.

One of the most inspiring speakers of the week was civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis. Even sitting in the same room as a historical icon was a surreal experience. Congressman Lewis spoke at length about civic engagement and standing up for what you believe in. These remarks not only encouraged me to continue my interest in politics but also helped me understand the purpose of the United States Senate Youth Program: to provide an opportunity for students to gain an in-depth view of the federal government and to encourage youth participation and activism. Ultimately, I walked away from the program more excited about public service than ever.

Perhaps the best part of the program was not any one speaker, but the people I got to share the experience with—the 103 other delegates. These delegates were intelligent, dedicated, passionate, and inspiring people that really shaped my time during Washington Week. From light-hearted conversations about food to intense debates about politics and religion, I enjoyed every single moment I had with my fellow delegates, and I know that the friendships I have made will be ones that last a lifetime. Leading us through this experience were 17 Military Mentors who taught us lessons about leadership, service, and humility. These outstanding 17 Armed Service members were an inspiration to all of us and gave me the perspective I needed for a successful week.

The United States Senate Program has been one of the most transformative experiences in my life. From the moment I stepped into the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel, I made incredible memories that I will carry with me forever. Each coach ride, late night debate, Cards against Humanity game, and walk down Capitol Hill will stay with me as I go into a new part of my life. I have a few people to thank for this life-changing week. Captain Iida, thank you for inspiring me to become a better citizen and for deeply shaping each of the delegates in our mentor group. Jakub and Erin, thank you for your endless dedication in capturing the best week of my life. To each staff member and member of the Hearst Foundation, thank you for your graciousness and welcoming hospitality. To my 103 other delegates, thank you for teaching me so much about my country and myself. To future USSYP delegates: make sure to savor every single moment of this program because it will change your life — it surely changed mine.