

Grace Dragna, LA -- 2018

As I filled out the application for the United States Senate Youth Program, I viewed the American government through a highly critical lens. Each news headline seemed to reflect gridlock, marginalization, and abandonment of democratic principles. I recognized the wealth of issues plaguing this great nation, yet I lacked the confidence in myself and in the system to seek outlets for tangible change.

This rather cynical outlook changed immediately upon entering the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel on March 3, 2018. The room was flooded with a diverse set of delegates, all eager to share their stories and learn from others. Despite regional, religious, and political differences, each delegate seemed genuinely interested in hearing the perspectives of others and asking questions to start a meaningful dialogue.

In a time seemingly more polarized than past decades, one of the most surprising yet refreshing messages of Washington Week was that of compromise and civility. Early in the week, Senator Tim Scott remarked that, "Too many people fixate on what we don't have in common." He then challenged us to search for common ground despite a difference in values, as compromise serves as a way to preserve hope in toxic environments. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch echoed this sentiment by reminding us, "You will never regret being kind."

After all, the humanity in politics drives the desire to become a public servant. To devote one's life to positive, impactful change requires a degree of self-sacrifice; this trait proved exemplary in each leader who spoke with us. Especially with the inspiring words of Congressman John Lewis, I learned that progress often comes with a level of personal risk. Nonetheless, Congressman Lewis explained that we must do what we can to redeem our country, and his message of persistence particularly resonated with me.

In the first few days of the program, a question pervaded my mind: How do I advocate for the change I hope to make while cooperating with those who disagree? This question was ultimately answered by Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a woman who has become one of my personal role models. On International Women's Day, Senator Klobuchar reminded us of the existing disparities regarding human rights in the United States. After sharing her progressive views on issues like gun regulation and immigration, she listed her current legislative initiatives to address them, taking care to note the involvement of her Republican co-sponsors. Senator Klobuchar's advice allowed me to understand that personal convictions and compromise are not mutually exclusive.

Beyond the extensive list of public servants who gave their time to meet with us, I offer endless gratitude to the Hearst Foundations, USSYP staff, and Military Mentors. I believe that I can speak for all 104 delegates when I say that we learned just as much from the example set by these individuals as we did from the speakers. Devoting a week's worth of time and resources to plan and execute a life-changing week for America's youth stands a testament to their service. Their lessons in respect, compassion, and humility proved an inexplicable gift, one that I will carry with me into the future.

The 2018 United States Senate Youth Program was a mirror, reflecting back to me the bright future of this country. Though today's political culture highlights the divisions among the people, Washington Week demonstrated a newfound sense of unity and cooperative spirit within my generation. The program challenged my preconceived notions about certain policies and about myself while connecting me to young people who ultimately seek to serve our nation. Words cannot properly express my gratitude.