

Morgan Atkins, MS -- 2018

Growing up, I have never really felt my age. My mom likes to say it is because I'm an old soul, but I think it is because I value experience over years. Humans mature through seminal moments, and for me, the United State Senate Youth Program was one of the most formative events of my existence.

I never expected to walk into a group of strangers -- give or take a few -- and find some of the most loving and supportive people in my life. We all came from starkly different backgrounds: the Bay Area of California, the great corn fields of Nebraska, or even the photocopy suburbs of Mississippi. Despite knowing nothing about each other, we all formed friendships within minutes of meeting each other face to face. One striking example I witnessed of this connection was on arrival day. I was one of the last delegates to arrive at The Mayflower Hotel, so by the time I was walking in the front door, everyone had already gotten acquainted and moved into Military Mentor groups. I was nervous that missing out on the initial greeting would put me at a disadvantage with bonding with my fellow delegates. Once I entered the ballroom, however, I was greeted with a chorus of excited squeals and shouts of my name. Thirty seconds into this adventure, and I had already felt a lifetime of love. We debated, we watched the Oscars, we danced, we ate (boy, did we eat), and most importantly, we learned throughout Washington Week from policy officials and from other delegates. We all shaped each other like clay, and we have become new people since leaving this program, yet all a part of the same collection of experiences. Hundreds of pictures and dozens of notes in my moleskin can show how immensely yet individually we all grew to love one another.

Even more than the connections, I will remember the remarkable opportunities given by this program. No other time in my life will I get to watch a delegate insinuate that Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch was voted in illegitimately. No other program would give me the honor of sobbing in the presence of a Civil Rights icon, and then go on to cry in the bathroom with some of the strongest women in my life over how grateful we were for his fight to gain equality for all. No where else will I get to hear the Senate parliamentarian describe the worry she felt when Congress shut down because her dog was home alone and deliver a spot on Bernie Sanders impression. Never again will I be at breakfast and be able to stump two media experts with a question about whether the media leads or follows public opinion. No more question and answer sessions in the Pentagon crashed by the Secretary of Defense, who we later found out had snuck away from his security detail to be there. Not another itinerary change to present us the Acting Associate Administrator for Support Mission at the Federal Emergency Management Agency who was so honestly candid with us. No one else will speak with eloquence and intelligence quite like my fellow delegates did, even if the fire alarm went off during the broadcast recording. No stories of "first day on the Hill" from Senators during a lunch reception, even though none could be funnier than Senator Klobuchar's detailing of her first day. No more notes in my journal. No more impressions of my "accent." No more elevator rides to the mezzanine. No more raves in the basement. Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program truly are unique. I am not even sure being in the actual United States Senate will outshine the experiences I have been granted with during this program. I am beyond grateful for the love, for the opportunities, and for the knowledge I gained during the United States Senate Youth Program. For fifty-six years, this program has been giving youth endless experiences, and I look forward to watching this program to continue to mature young leaders for many years to come.