

Hali Kapperud, MT – 2018

How do you describe a week that has undoubtedly changed your life? In one short week, I was able to go to places and meet national leaders that most high school juniors and seniors would only dream of.

I have been asked several times what my favorite part of Washington Week was and what I will remember the most. Naturally, I tell about the details of the trip outlined in the agenda: meeting the president of the United States, Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, and Congressman John Lewis. But the most memorable part of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) isn't something that can be described in a mere two-page essay.

When I first found out that I was chosen to represent Montana as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program, I was nervous. I was soon going to be around some of the brightest, most accomplished students in the nation. However, those nerves were replaced with excitement as soon as we walked into the Mayflower Hotel. The first thing Mr. Cox told us that night was that, as delegates, the program would be many things. We were told that the week would be exciting. It would be challenging, tiring, uplifting, dynamic, intense, and emotional. And he was absolutely correct.

Throughout the week, we heard from incredible speakers who provided us with insight, advice, and a better understanding of the functions of our government. Some of the many keynote speakers included Judge Robert Henry of the 10th Circuit, Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, and the Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden, as well as senators, ambassadors, and other cabinet members.

If you had told me six months ago that I would get to meet the president of the United States, the vice president, and the first lady, I probably would have said that you were crazy. The thought had never crossed my mind once in my life that I would have this opportunity, and that made the meeting even more special. To come from a small, rural town of roughly 100 people and meet some of the most powerful leaders in our nation was an honor and a privilege, and to be able to shake the president's hand and stand next to him in a picture was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. When President Trump walked towards the room, the first thing he said to us was, "What a good-looking group!" Hearing that statement lightened the mood and made him more human. This helped me realize that no matter whether you agree with him or not, he's still a human being like the rest of us.

Reflecting upon my week in Washington, one of the most memorable moments was waiting for Congressman John Lewis to walk into the room to speak to us. At one point everyone went silent, even though he wasn't even about to walk in, which accurately demonstrates the excitement and anticipation we had for this meeting. Being in the same room as one of the most influential leaders in the Civil Rights Movement was astounding and inspiring.

Overall the week was full of experiences that left me speechless and made me think about what it truly means to be an American. Our visit to Arlington National Cemetery and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier made me think about the sacrifices that were made for our country by the men and women who fought so that we could live freely and pursue our dreams. Visiting the Vietnam and Korean War Memorials made me realize how our freedom truly isn't free. Listening to Senate Historian Betty Koed made me realize that we can shape history. "History is made when ordinary men and women strive to pursue something extraordinary," and Tim Scott reminded us that, "Failure is not fatal if you refuse to quit."

If I'm being honest, I learned a lot from the speakers throughout the week, but no amount of knowledge that I gained from keynotes could compare to what I learned from my fellow delegates and the Military Mentors. USSYP filled a gap that was missing in my small community: the ability to have a structured, civil, political conversation. Even though we had varying views and opinions, there was always a mutual respect between delegates. Senator Angus King from Maine advised us, "Choose good people. Surround yourself with the best people you can." I can say, without a doubt in my mind that I have found those people, my people, among the USSYP Class of 2018.

Justice Neil Gorsuch said to the delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program, "Every generation has its challenges, but I know you can rise to meet them and overcome them." I am convinced that this group of delegates has the potential to really change things and, if faced with the task of running our country, will be the generation that makes a difference. I am confident that we will make Justice Gorsuch and the other leaders of our country proud.

I left Washington Week feeling inspired and convinced that this was, and will be by far, one of the best experiences of my life. I left Washington, D.C. with 103 new friends, new ideas, and more patriotism than I ever thought was possible. My deepest amount of gratitude and appreciation goes to the Hearst Foundations, the U.S. Senate, USSYP staff, the Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates for making this week truly life-changing. I hope our paths cross again in the future.