

Bennett Stillerman, NC – 2018

The sound of blood rushing through my head was almost loud enough to drown out the rain smashing against the bus window. I was sitting in the front row as I reviewed my notes for a speech I had to give. Despite being selected for this program, I hated public speaking, and now I was supposed to introduce David Ferriero, archivist of the United States? Not my ideal job. Nevertheless, I had to do it. I needed to clear my head first. As the bus marched steadily to our destination, and my doom, I looked out the window at the National Mall. Standing amongst the blades of grass, wind whipping all around, was an Albino Squirrel.

The entire bus seemingly noticed this miracle all at once and exploded in excitement. Phones clicked as they captured this natural wonder. Neighbors turned to each other, mouths agape as they tried to reconcile their former worldview with the fact that they had seen an Albino Squirrel. Meanwhile, I felt my heartbeat slow. As I studied the magnificent animal, I felt at peace. The bus slowed to a stop, and we filed into the National Archives. I may have been nervous before, but that was before the Albino Squirrel. Now? I felt empowered.

That story may seem mundane, but it is representative of my experience during Washington Week. That fateful week in March was just as extraordinary, exciting, humbling, and empowering as that Albino Squirrel. While impossible to encapsulate in a 1-2 page essay, I will do my best.

The first thing I noticed about my fellow delegates and speakers is that they talked funny. Being a city-dweller from Charlotte, NC, I was used to neutral accents with a bit of a southern drawl. Finding aliens that pronounced the word “bag” like “baeg” threw me for a loop. Just as I had gotten over that, I was introduced to Justice Neil Gorsuch. As he imparted his wisdom on what his favorite novels are (read Dickens and Douglas Addams, by the way), he spoke like a 20th-century grandfather, emphasizing every other syllable in an emphatic way. It became apparent to me that all of our speakers, from Trump to Martin Baron of the *Washington Post*, are human beings. They have quirks and idiosyncrasies that make them unique. The most important lesson of Washington Week lay within that fact. I was able to board my flight back to Charlotte knowing that everyone from the president to the delegates from the Midwest is flawed. I felt empowered knowing that pronouncing “baeg” instead of “bag” isn’t necessarily a deal-breaker in public service. Without Washington Week, I may never have understood that.

The second thing that I noticed, primarily about my fellow delegates, is that not everyone thinks like me. My mentor group was quite the collection of opinions and backgrounds. Friends from Berkeley, California and Idaho duked it out over the finer points of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with more passion and intelligence as I had ever seen. Delegates from Parkland, Florida and Bountiful, Idaho taught me perspectives and cultures that I had never been exposed to in the suburbs of Charlotte. Each of us fit together like pieces of a puzzle. The greatest strength of the program is you. Each of us have a wealth of experiences, opinions, passions, thoughts, and strengths that make us unique. Yet, despite that wealth of uniqueness, I gained more from my fellow delegates than in 12 grades of schooling.

The last thing that I noticed about Washington Week is that I really, really did not want to leave. The final night, filled with coffee, delirious conversations, dancing, and nostalgia, cemented everything I loved about Washington Week. I was forced to reckon with the fact that the amazing group of delegates that I had come to love was being split apart again. But, the experience does not end there. Washington Week, while fun, was a call to action. The road ahead began with the flight home. It is a testament to the power of the program when I say that I left D.C. feeling a mix of empowered, humbled, optimistic, and

realistic. The paradox of lessons that I learned is precisely what I, and the rest of us, needed to continue fighting for ourselves, our communities, our country, and our planet.

I end this essay eerily as I began, with a storm raging outside. A month has passed since Washington Week and not much has changed. I'm still stressed about college, the news is still hard to read, and it is getting even more difficult to wake up early for school. But, one thing has changed. I feel a profound sense of hope for the world. I see opportunity and nuance in my community, and I feel better prepared to leave the future a better place, like Washington Week did for me.

I hope that somewhere in a bush in the National Mall, an Albino Squirrel reminisces about the time that he caught a glimpse of a Senate Youth Program bus. Looking back, all of the delegates and Military Mentors were just as special and magnificent as that white, gleaming rodent.