

Aaron Braddock, NM – 2018

Upon being selected for the U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP), there was one constant statement I heard; Washington Week would be a life-changing experience. From the alumna that I spoke to in my hometown to the congratulations letter in the welcome packet, every correspondence included this reference. This is a term that we all hear quite often in our lives, and as a result, when people told me this week would be life-changing, I processed it as a rather dramatic way of saying it would be an amazing week. I most certainly went into this week expecting it to be one like no other. But even though I heard the term “life-changing” describe the events of the first full week of March dozens of times before I experienced it, I was completely unprepared for something that I still have a wonderfully positive case of whiplash from having experienced. I was totally unprepared for my life to be changed.

It has been over a month now since Washington Week, and I still have difficulty fully wrapping my head around it. I remember every moment vividly, from jumping into an SUV with guards reminiscent of the Secret Service and driving through D.C., having an incredibly engaging and welcoming conversation with delegates, to walking into the ballroom of the Mayflower to a flurry of alumni, delegates, and shockingly, Mexican food, having been prepared to be deprived of the latter. I quickly learned that the Arizona and New Jersey delegates I had befriended in the SUV would be the first of many. That Saturday night consisted of everyone happily introducing themselves and instantaneously making the connections that the week would be characterized by. That night could not have been a better precursor of the week to come, because what was to become the best part of the week was made clear in our minds; it was the relationships that would last a lifetime.

Psychology says that when someone experiences significant events with another, there is a special bond that makes it easier for them to be close to one another. It has become clear to me that Washington Week is the perfect example of that fact. There is only one group of people who shared the experience of being the first class of the USSYP to ask Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch a question, one group of people who all simultaneously teared up at the honor of speaking to civil rights icon and Congressman John Lewis on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, one group of people who were called “a good looking group” by President Trump. (Just kidding, I’m pretty sure he had said it to his kids too).

I will always have a connection bound by the experience of a lifetime with these people, and after a week of engaging with them in person and a month of connecting with them from across the country as we attempt to process this surreal experience, I could not be happier to know them. Senate Historian Betty Koed said that the history of the U.S. Senate is about the power of the individual. My fellow delegates are walking illustrations of that power, and I am proud to see that the world is becoming a better place as they wield it.

I cannot overstate my gratitude to the Military Mentors who guided us throughout the week, who gave a human perspective of the Armed Forces that I was not personally familiar with. Considering the appropriate lack of sleep that we all had each night, their consistent rigor and regimentation each morning at 6:45 sharp was appreciated. The performances by the Joint Armed Forces Color Guard, United States Army Brass Quintet, flag folding ceremony by the Military Mentor team, and U.S. flags given to each delegate at the farewell dinner were appropriate capstones to an experience that gave me a newfound belief in the future of our country. I will always be grateful to the staff of the U.S. Senate Youth Program for this experience of a lifetime. With the comforting knowledge that my fellow delegates across our nation will be doing the same, I look forward to working to the best of my ability to make sure that the nation we call home is always a nation to be proud of.