

Miriam Wallstrom, NM – 2018

At the beginning of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), we were warned in the opening speech that Washington Week would be emotional. At hearing this, I smiled to myself, not understanding how a week full of speeches by acclaimed politicians and visits to museums could tug on my heart strings. However, my skepticism toward emotion soon became surrender, as every day I was faced with something that brought tears to my eyes, either through sorrow or through joy.

I cried when I saw tragedy, recorded within the walls of the Newseum. We visited the Newseum on Sunday, and the exhibition on 9/11 detailed a minute-by-minute account of the terrorist attack. Videos played, showing civilians crying, firefighters running, and smoke billowing. The exhibition on 9/11 was heartbreaking, but upon its viewing I was reminded of the resiliency of the American spirit.

I cried when I heard John Lewis speak. On Wednesday, we had the honor of hearing from civil rights hero John Lewis. Now a member of the House of Representatives, Lewis was a chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963 to 1966 and helped organize the March on Washington. By the end of his speech, the impact of all he had done for our country seemed to hit me, and tears streamed down my face.

I cried when we walked into the Senate Gallery and I saw Bernie Sanders, who stood up and gave an impassioned speech. His hair was messy and his gesticulations were expressive, just as I had seen on television for the past two years. My eyes welled with tears as he questioned why Dodd-Frank bank regulations were being discussed in the Senate as the lives of millions of Dreamers were in limbo.

I cried on the last night of Washington Week, when I witnessed my first flag folding ceremony. As our Military Mentors stood with the American flag and read moving quotes from our nation's past, a newfound sense of patriotism soared within me. The patriotism I found during Washington Week embodied an appreciation of how far our country has come. More importantly, however, I found recognition of how far our country still must grow, and how my co-delegates and I have the ability to serve and improve our nation.

I cried when I said good-bye to Aaron, my co-delegate from New Mexico, who quickly became my friend after avid discussions about green chile. We embraced at his gate, whispered "thank you" to each other, and I began to cry as he walked onto the gangway. He was one of so many delegates that showed me kindness, insight, and passion for service during the week.

Clearly, Washington Week was emotional. But the plethora of tears I shed during the week only helped me grow more patriotic, and more appreciative of the sacrifices thousands have made to propel our country to where it is today. I believe that patriotism is not the blind assertion that our country is amazing, but the vigorous dedication through public service to the improvement of conditions within our country.

Although the role I want to take within public service is not yet clear to me, I do know that Washington Week allowed me a closer look at the inner workings of government and at the selfless devotion so many people show for our country. No matter what my future may explicitly hold, I know now that I want to be in an active role of giving back to the country that has given me so much.