

Kate De Groot, UT -- 2018

I often come back from vacations and great opportunities saying that they were the best week of my life. I've said that same sentence many times during my life, but it has never meant so much to me as when I said it while crying at the airport in Salt Lake City returning from the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). I recently found a picture from three years ago of my first time in Washington, D.C. In the photo, I am grinning, almost uncontrollably, with the White House in the background. I never thought that I would be looking out at the same spot from inside the White House only a few years later. I remember the awe I felt in 8th grade, being among buildings filled with power, even if I only got to see them from the outside. I experienced that same awe as I went inside those same buildings and got to meet and hear from those in power during USSYP.

Every time I get asked about the most impactful speakers during Washington Week, I tell the person asking that the most impactful speakers weren't those who stood up in front of everyone and shared what they have learned. Those who affected me the most were the people I talked with at dinner, whether it was about raising the minimum wage or debating if Tupac is actually alive. It was the conversations I had while riding on the bus or while exploring a museum. I have never been in a place with so many engaged, passionate, and humble youth. I am still in awe of my fellow delegates' selfless actions in the pursuit of a more equal and accountable nation. I got to know the other delegates not only as superhero public servants that inspire me, but also as people who are compassionate and down to earth. While memories of exact speakers may fade, my memories of late night conversations with my roommate and stories told in the mezzanine will never leave me.

The singular moment that I will most remember from Washington Week was having the honor to be heard from Congressman John Lewis. As he walked into the room where we were all seated for lunch, it became so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. One of my favorite things he told us was, "When something isn't right, we have the moral obligation to do something". This rang especially true for me, as I realized that I needed to take a more active role in the issues I believe in. Often, we just stand by and let others fix the injustices in society, and his words made me realize that I have the power as a young person to make a profound change in our nation. I shouldn't feel limited by being too young or too inexperienced. After all, he was only a student when he was fighting for racial equality. As John Lewis continued talking, I could feel my heart beat faster and my body start to shake out of admiration and respect for the hero taking time out of his day to speak to us. It made me realize the uniqueness of what I was experiencing even further. When he told us that March 7th, the day he spoke to us, was the anniversary of Selma, I started to feel emotion build up inside of me. About half of all the delegates had tears in their eyes, myself included. To know that someone who had helped lead what I read about in history books was telling us that we are the future, was incredibly life-changing.

I was told many times going into USSYP that it would change my life. I thought that was impossible; that my life couldn't be radically altered in just 7 days. How profoundly wrong I was. I came back a changed person, with more defined goals and a new opinion of the youth of America. Speaking to my other delegates made me realize how much hope and trust I should have in America's future. After all, my fellow delegates will be future senators, ambassadors, and maybe even presidents. The future is definitely in good hands. However, it is impossible to speak about how life-changing USSYP was, without speaking of my Military Mentor and my group. The opportunity to talk with my group about our passions and dreams for the future was incredible as I was able to hear from people of all different backgrounds. It also left me with a deeper respect for those serving our nation in all branches of the Armed Forces.

The unexpected moments of Washington week were some of the most unforgettable. By a stroke of luck, I heard both Senator Sanders and Senator Warren speak on the Senate floor. When we walked into the gallery, it took a few seconds to register what was happening, but once it did, it took a great effort to remain silent. To see many of our inspirations in person became an experience in which we discovered our own potential. Another unexpected moment came when I was speaking with my Senator, Mike Lee. He had taken the time to learn about me and some of what I had done in my community before he went to the Senate reception. It was an honor to have a genuine conversation with my senator about topics ranging from the architecture in D.C. to how he "was feeling the Bern" (but only on certain issues, his

staffer reminded us). The time with him reminded me that even when someone is in a position of power, especially an elected position, it is important to stay humble and listen to others. I'll look back fondly on these memories that came out of situations I never thought would happen to me.

It is impossible to express all of my feelings about Washington Week in words -- or in two pages of text. The experience itself was something I will never have again at such an influential time in my life. I left Washington, D.C. with more confidence in our future. I left with more hope in government, as I heard from speakers such as Senator Klobuchar, who are so determined to make America a better place for all people, no matter their background. I left with more appreciation for my country and how people have been fighting for their beliefs since its inception. I began to realize how much I take my freedoms for granted. I also gained a deeper respect for others -- from one side of the political spectrum to the other. The USSYP left me with so many memories and lessons, ones that I will carry throughout the rest of my life, wherever it takes me. The most important thing I learned, however, was how to believe in myself. I know that I came into Washington Week unsure of myself and the influence I could have. I left knowing that anything is possible and that I will make a difference, along with my 103 fellow delegates, as we move forward towards a better America.