

Cassidy Sadonis, VA – 2018

It seems an impossible task to describe Washington Week. My colleagues have put their experiences through a plethora of lenses. They have described the events better than I ever could. So, instead of regurgitating the uncountable unique experiences I felt during the week of March 3rd, I will do something a little different. I will tell the story of who I was before this week, and who I am now.

Every delegate has their story. We are children of refugees, immigrants, revolutionaries, and even very average people. We are a diverse array of personalities, ideologies, and experiences. Each one of us brings something select and valuable to the USSYP, and the United States as a whole. In the penultimate days of Washington Week, I found myself reflecting upon the similarities between speakers. Like ourselves, our speakers came from diverse backgrounds, and held vastly dissimilar political beliefs; however, all of them shared one value in common: public service.

In the years that led up to my selection I found myself in a severe depression. This is in and of itself a long story, one for another occasion. The journey that led me out of this depression, I would later learn, was sparked by the same value that our speakers all cherished so tightly.

In February of 2016, I phone-banked for Senator Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign. I had always done a large amount of community service, but never in the political area. Senator Sanders sparked something in me, something every public servant shares in common, the desire to do good. This desire pushed me forward. It pushed me to apply for the United States Senate Youth program.

Upon first learning of my selection, I thought I would engage in heated debate with the brightest young minds in the country. However, the moment I arrived, I knew I was wrong.

If I were to write every experience with my fellow delegates, this essay would stretch miles long. So instead, I must reflect on just a few that shaped the way I perceived the program itself. The first was Stephen Marante. Stephen is from Parkland. I knew this long before Washington. We read the heartbroken, terrified messages from him as the shootings transpired. As the events of February 14th transpired, Stephen conveyed information to us contemporaneously.

Stephen is a Republican. As we rode the bus to the Mayflower hotel, after landing in Dulles airport, Stephen and I spoke at length about his experiences in the February shooting. Stephen had his neighborhood locked down, essentially. He had friends in Stoneman-Douglas that he could not get in contact with. He went through something that all of us teenagers pray we never experience (even though many of us already have).

Stephen is a Republican, Parkland however, caused him to think differently on the issue of the Second Amendment. This truly set the tone for the entire week. I am a talkative, extroverted person. I had been so in our group chat in the months leading up to the week. But as I walked into the Mayflower hotel, I knew it was time for me to listen. I spoke sparingly. I learned about my fellow delegates, my friends. The speakers put a magnifying glass above each of our heads. Congressman Lewis, in particular, imposed upon us the importance of our position, and the value of our combined intelligence.

My goal, for as long as I can remember, was (and is) to be a civil rights leader. Growing up a white boy from western Virginia, I'm not sure exactly what inspired that (other than the black excellence I was constantly surrounded by – which we are all surrounded by if we simply look). That was hampered down by social constraints. In my area, I am a voice of change. I like to think of myself as THE voice for change in my small youthful community. When I sat in with the black delegation on the evening of Tuesday, March 5th, I felt something within me change.

I came to Washington sure of my beliefs, and sure of myself. But as I sat and listened to some of the brightest young black minds in the country, I began to go through an identity crisis. When faced with the most brilliant people of color I've ever known, I began to question what my role was as a white ally. This was the centerpiece of my week in Washington.

Nothing specific caused it. I think it was simply intimidation. Anyone who has met the force of nature that is Taiwo Odunowo would easily understand. It is truly hard to explain what happened within me, but I saw the black excellence in front of me, and immediately had to reconsider what my role is in the coming movement for Civil Rights. I always pictured myself as a leader, but now, I felt sure that it was not my place. What room is there for a white man at the front of a movement whose goal is to reverse all the damage done BY white men?

I went through the week. I basked in the brilliant minds of the 2018 USSYP. I met my hero, the man whose work pushed me out of depression, Senator Bernie Sanders. A few of the delegates and I wrote him a letter in February (that caused quite a stir within the delegation). The amazing Lynn DeSmet and Rayne Guilford got word to him that some of the young delegates who he inspired were hoping to meet him. They made it happen. I sobbed. It was amazing.

The day after the Senate reception I met a horrible President and was unimpressed. It was not memorable, however, I do thank the Hearst Foundations for making it possible for some of my friends that were indeed impressed, as well as allowing me to step foot in the building that has hosted so many momentous occasions.

A few days later I left my new friends, but they did not leave my thoughts. My identity crisis was far from over, but it had retracted into my subconscious. Before I knew it, I was graduating high school. After I received my diploma I walked into the commons area of my school, and was greeted by a local hero. He was the first black student to attend my high school, Robert E. Lee high school. The school's population is now made up of 50% black students. He broke the mold for generations to follow, and his life was very hard. It was only a passing moment. He shook my hand, and he told me that as I was receiving my diploma he turned to his family and said, "Pay close attention to this boy, one day you're gonna be voting for him." He smiled, patted my shoulder, and walked away. At that moment, my silly identity crisis was over.

The irony of a white man feeling out of place, weakened, and unsure of what his role is gave me a perspective into the day to day experience of American people of color that I'm not sure could have been procured anywhere but in the USSYP. I realized that to worry about whether or not I could lead the movement is an issue with my ego, not with my society. I am good. My intentions are good. My actions are good. I come from a bloodline of complicit oppressors, and I am an objector. This newfound perspective offers me a facet of humility that will help me accomplish any goal imaginable, while most importantly, never silencing the voices of any one of my peers.

This strange story of identity is a bit nuanced, and may come out sounding strange, but it is something that I treasure. It never would have happened without the brilliant minds that the Hearst Foundations tracked down through this beautiful and amazing program.