

Sojas Wagle, AR – 2019

While waiting in the airport to board my flight to D.C., I was fortunate enough to meet up with one of my fellow delegates, who was quite awestruck at the mere thought of shaking hands and rubbing elbows with some of the most powerful figures in our nation in just a few short days. With star-studded names like Chief Justice John Roberts and President Donald Trump on the agenda, it was difficult to not understand her wonder. However, in that moment, I never really internalized this wondrous glance at Washington Week. To preface, I'm not exactly the "excited" type of person, so I felt a bit heavyhearted knowing that I might not find this week as exciting as my fellow delegates. Even when I was meeting the alumni following my arrival at the Mayflower and phrases like "the best week of your life" littered our conversations, I couldn't foresee the impact that this week would have on my holistic growth.

But even with my down-in-the-dumps attitude (I also was recovering from the flu at the time if that helps to paint a picture), Washington Week still spoke to me in a way that is quite literally ineffable. It's like taking a picture of the Grand Canyon. No matter what angle or lighting you choose, a still photo could never fully portray the miraculous experience of being there. It's the same for Washington Week. No matter what words I choose or how I put them together, the sheer admiration I have for this week could only be conveyed to someone if they were with me, side-by-side, experiencing it.

The first day of events was abound with historical learning opportunities. From witnessing the principal key of the Bastille in George Washington's home at Mount Vernon to touching remnants of the Berlin Wall at the Newseum, I absorbed more information than I could have from any history lecture because I was *actually* there, seeing and feeling the very artifacts that I vaguely learned about in school.

The following morning, I worked up the courage to ask Former Chief Judge Robert Henry a question with the help of the best support system I could ask for: my Military Mentor group, which was affectionately called Team Lin-guine after our Military Mentor Captain Patrick Lin. Captain Lin served almost as a father figure during my time in D.C., for I looked up to him and marveled at his commitment to protecting our nation and ensuring that I, along with my Team Lin-guine family, relished my time in D.C. while it lasted. Watching Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough tear up over the Senate's adoption of the nuclear option to eliminate the filibuster broke my heart and filled me with hope, safely knowing that people on Capitol Hill truly take their job seriously and personally. At the Supreme Court, I stood in awe at the ornate architecture and Chief Justice John Robert's extensive knowledge of jurisprudence.

The next day, I had a blast dining next to the Constitution (literally, not figuratively) and taking on the role of a diplomat during a diplomacy simulator about the water crisis between the fictional countries of Yeeland and Grusa. Hearing an outside perspective about the United States from the Italian Ambassador and Martha Raddatz's testimony about covering stories in the midst of a conflict watered my budding knowledge of international diplomacy and compelled me to consider journalism as a possible career avenue. Listening to the soulful sounds of the Austrian Cellist Kian Soltani at the Kennedy Center following a meeting with the President of the United States rounded off the day with an appreciative look at the arts and amenities abounding in the capital.

But of course, the highlight of my week was knowing that I would be on national television during the C-SPAN town hall. Expressing my opinion about the president's policies gave me a soapbox to stand on that I was never given before. Despite society's dismissive attitude towards my generation, in that moment, my voice mattered. My opinions mattered.

The funny thing about Washington Week is that you don't realize how life-changing it *really* is until it's over. And I believe this is all because of the "emergent properties," if you will, that make this week so unique. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While each speaker and tour individually provided me with new opportunities to learn, grow, and make memories with newfound friends, the entire experience was where the magic happened. I admit. I was spellbound at the opportunity to meet delegates from across the country, but I also was a bit overwhelmed (and humbled) after hearing all the accolades and experiences these delegates had already received at such a young age. It was comforting to know that these bright minds of our generation would be our future leaders. In fact, I already would trust some of them to hold our delicate country in their heedful hands today. Not only were they capable, but they were also bipartisan.

And you don't really understand the beauty of bipartisanship until you see it with your own eyes. Gratefully, I was a part of that dialogue, civilly communicating with my fellow delegates from across the aisle and listening to speakers who were doing just that in the status quo to bridge the divide forcefully sown into the fabric of our nation.

But above all, I learned that politics is a shape-shifting, fickle creature. You don't have to be a politician or lobbyist to use politics to embellish your life. Politics is omnipresent. During Washington Week, I met parliamentarians, secretaries, judges, doctors, lawyers, and everyone in between who used and were affected by politics in their daily life. And as a future pediatric psychiatrist, I'm confident that I won't be an exception. Politics will be with me. Always. Thanks to the United States Senate Youth Program.