

Joseph Lee, MD – 2019

Coming from a low-income background, I was raised with a lack of many things. A lack of television, newspaper access, healthcare, and a host of other things. But I was unaware that I lacked anything, for I had my father the pastor, my mother the wonderful home cook and supervisor of us all, and my sister the companion. I had a room that I shared with my father, a house that I shared with another family, and a school that I shared with many friends. As a child, if I was unaware of the things I lacked, did I ever really lack anything at all?

But as I grew older, as that veil of childhood innocence fell away, I was told by others what I lacked. I was told that I was a minority from a low-income community, that I typically lacked access to healthcare and proper education, that I was more likely to drop out and not attend college, that I was something that needed to be fixed.

I would always hear about government initiatives aimed at alleviating these issues, supposed solutions to my world which I never knew was broken. But who was making those policies? Who was deciding for my community what the best step forward was? Traditionally, as the answer usually is, it was white men of wealth and social status. They were qualified in many ways, educated and well-versed beyond measure, yet they lacked the one thing that validates their position of leadership: perspective. The needs of the lower class are sorely misrepresented on Capitol Hill and at the top levels of our bureaucracy. So, I have always strived to reach a seemingly impossible dream, to become a senator or politician that would revolutionize politics and exact the change that was needed in my community. I wanted my perspective to be heard and valued.

I viewed Washington Week as a step towards that dream. It, of course, became much more than. From being intimidated by utensil etiquette to learning what it meant to be breathless as I met Chief Justice Roberts, I was absolutely overwhelmed from start to finish. I entered extraordinary buildings and encountered the nation's top leaders, ate the most lavish meals and lounged in a historic hotel. I will never forget the passionate discussions I had with my peers in the Grand Ballroom or the freezing, exhilarating walks we had in Washington. I know I echo my peers when I say this was the foremost honor and privilege of my lifetime.

But, if I'm being frank, I felt out of place. Did this make the week any less enjoyable? A resounding no. But it did make me more grateful for what I had back home. When I finally jumped into my bed on March 9th, I realized that I was worn out from the formal greetings and rigid structure of the week, it was as if I were perpetually holding my breath. I missed going to school, seeing my friends, having meetings on the floor of a classroom with junk food being passed around, and the feeling of being welcome. It's not that anyone was unwelcoming during Washington Week, if anything, it's a mindset that I imposed upon myself. But it makes me think. While my peers were going to Washington, doing things in the room where it happens, who was looking out for those in my community? I think that we all have a role, and no matter how small or large, we should be bold enough to assume it. When we recognize that there is a need around us, it is up to us to do something about it. And you don't need to be United States senator to do so. My fellow United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) delegates, who have already stirred up change in their communities back home, taught me that. Some of us will become the president, a senator, a department head, and so on. But some of us will become local charity organizers, missionaries, and much more. We will go where we can serve.

If they need me on Capitol Hill, if duty ever calls, I will be there. But for now, I'm content with providing for those around me and making a difference from the ground up.