

Luke Koenigsknecht, MI – 2019

As I look back on what was the greatest week of my life, I remember quite distinctly one quote: “I see the image and likeness of God in every human face, and if you do that, it is difficult to instinctively hate.” When I heard the Chief Justice of the United States, John Roberts, say those words, I was instantly struck. I happen to share the very same faith tradition as Chief Justice Roberts, and his words were the quintessence of my personal approach to engaging in dialogue with those I may disagree with. We delegates, however, came to Washington in a time of crisis. It doesn’t take much to recognize that political polarization has severely damaged our nation’s unity in recent years, as many of our speakers talked about when they met with us. I saw Washington Week as a great opportunity to engage in something that is sadly in short supply nowadays: civil discourse.

At first, I was intimidated by the other delegates, as all of them seemed so much more accomplished than me! Just by reading their introductions on the Facebook page, I could tell that they were some of the brightest and most involved students in the nation. And here I was, just a guy from West Michigan; the Impostor Syndrome was real at this point. However, over the course of the week I recognized that even though we were such high achieving students, we were still normal people facing the normal problems. We bonded over our shared affliction with senioritis as well as the stresses of the modern college application process. However, we were not chosen for this program because we were ordinary students. No; we were chosen because we were extraordinary. Each and every delegate went above and beyond what was simply required of them in order for them to truly make a difference in their community, and that’s what inspired me the most throughout the week. The delegates truly are the future leaders of this great nation, and I am confident that wherever we end up, from law to government to activism to research, we will change our nation for the better.

The speakers we met throughout the week are obviously the most advertised part of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) and for good reason; each and every one had something fascinating to say— something exemplified by the over thirty pages of notes in my journal—and I appreciate all of them for taking their time to meet with us, especially Dr. Ben Carson, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who I had the honor to formally introduce. Simply being within that building makes one feel the authority and respect generated by that office. However, the most fruitful parts of these events were the discussions I had with my fellow delegates afterwards, where I was exposed to many ideas and positions that admittedly I had either not been familiar with or some that I vehemently disagreed with. Indeed, it is necessary to say that due to my generally conservative political ideology that I was certainly in the minority during Washington Week, as I can say that I was certainly more excited than others to see many of our speakers. Despite this, there were very few times where I felt personally attacked for my deeply-held ideological positions or my even more deeply-held religious beliefs. While I cannot say everyone was always tolerant and respectful, especially in their attitude towards the president, the program was most importantly fostering an atmosphere of civil, open debate, and the vast majority of interactions I had with my fellow delegates were just that — tolerant and respectful.

Overall, I can truly say that Washington Week 2019 was the time in my life where I truly fell in love with the idea of America. Sure, I knew about how the government worked and I followed the news, but physically being in the capital and seeing all that history and interacting with these important people truly made me believe in our nation. While we may be in a trying time of division right now, it is my firm belief and hope that the experiences I had and the civility and respect exhibited by my fellow delegates will become the norm, not the exception, in the future, and that we will all be able to work together to preserve our Republic, as “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”