

## **Darren Janz, NC – 2019**

As I looked outside the airplane window on the morning I arrived in Washington, the Potomac smiled from below, the Capitol and the White House only barely large enough to see. I had been to the city before, confident of my familiarity with the intricacies of its buildings and the people and processes of the government that operated therein. But throughout my week in the District of Columbia with the United States Senate Youth Program, I for the first time began to truly understand the immensity of Washington – not just the vastness of the city and height of its monuments, but the immensity of the history, institutions, and values it represents. And the more my fellow delegates and I explored the city, from the marble halls of the Supreme Court to the negotiation rooms of the Department of State, the more we began to understand and appreciate just how much we had yet to learn.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Washington Week was learning firsthand what public service truly means to our nation's public servants. Our group of delegates first came to Washington with a variety of backgrounds and experiences in government and politics – most of us had volunteered on campaigns or interned for government officials – but we also came with many of the preconceived notions that define public opinion of American politics, that most politicians seek only to advance their careers and put partisan agendas ahead of the public interest.

During Washington Week, however, we had the opportunity to engage in remarkably candid discussions with those who create and administer federal policy both in the public eye and behind the scenes, allowing us to develop a much more comprehensive understanding of what drives our nation's public servants to complete their work. From United States Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough's emotional recollection of her work to preserve longstanding Senate tradition in spite of partisan pressures to Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts' powerful defense of judicial independence, the conversations we had defined for us a newfound appreciation of the values and institutions that characterize American government, as well as the public servants that defend them. And from Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Paul Selva's personable description of his day-to-day responsibilities protecting America's national interests to Federal Emergency Management Agency Associate Administrator Brian Kamoie's discussion of how his participation in this very program as a high school student affected his passion for public service, the discussions we engaged in inspired many of us to continue exploring those values and institutions well beyond Washington Week.

One of my favorite experiences participating in the United States Senate Youth Program was interacting with and learning from our Military Mentors, who guided us throughout our week in Washington and shared with us their backgrounds in service all while representing the five branches of the armed forces as we met our nation's leaders. As a student who came into Washington Week with little understanding of or familiarity with military service, interacting with our Military Mentors was an unparalleled experience, allowing me to learn more about military careers and the importance of military service while relating personally to our mentors and learning just how similar our backgrounds were. I found myself leaving Washington Week not only with a newfound understanding of and respect for military service, but a newfound familiarity and connectedness with the men and women currently serving in uniform.

Already, over a month has passed since Washington Week concluded, but it seems just yesterday that I stepped off of the airplane that cold, early spring morning and first met the delegates, mentors, and program staff that would make the week so special. I'm not sure how long I'll remember the late nights we spent together or the laughs we shared with our nation's leaders, but I know that the relationships we made and the lessons we learned will last a lifetime.