

## **Katherine Broten, NM – 2019**

My roommate and I had pretty much the worst seat possible at dinner. We were indecisive at every meal, but this particular evening we had been especially hesitant to pick a seat, zig zagging between the meticulously dressed tables until there were no seats left. After years of searching, we settled into adjacent seats in the far back corner. We couldn't see the stage and we weren't acquainted with the delegates at our table. I shot her a sarcastic look as if to say, "great selection, this was definitely the best option." She kicked me under the table and I grumbled to myself. Then, I looked up.

I was having dinner next to the Constitution of the United States. If you've never been in the National Archives after-hours, I recommend pulling a Ben Gates and breaking in. It was breathtaking, like looking over the San Juan Forest after reaching a peak in the Rocky Mountains. The imposing stone arches were even more forbearing illuminated in the warm yellow glow of chandeliers. The voices of my fellow delegates bounced around the vast room, off of stones and place settings and documents of national importance. From the worst seat in the room, I could gaze across the sea of delegates, every single one seemingly more impressive than the last. The personification of a geographical hodgepodge connected not by shared experience, skin color, or ideology but by intellect and passion. California casually chatted with Indiana about judicial review over the first course: a salad with unidentifiable but phenomenal vegetables. Oklahoma and I discussed American imperialism over coffee served in gold rimmed cups. New York and Utah compared campaign experience during the entrée: chicken with something called soufflé that I'd never even heard of before. During dessert: ice cream, cotton candy, and funnel cake served fancily somehow; a delegate living on base in South Korea discussed interventionism with a Military Mentor in the Coast Guard. This was certainly not my public school cafeteria in rural New Mexico. The worst seat in the room felt like the best place in the world in that moment.

This is how all of Washington Week felt. I would fall into the rhythm of the schedule, shuffling to and from events and letting the extraordinary fade into normal for a moment. Then it would hit me, the enormity of it all. I was actually there, standing in the East Wing of the White House, being watched over by chandeliers that had witnessed Lincoln and Kennedy. I was actually looking at the same Treaty of Paris that Benjamin Franklin looked at and felt the same patriotism. I find it hard to verbalize now, to my constituents at home the significance of my experience. The knowledge I gained cannot be quantified and you cannot measure the broadening of my horizons. The one thing I know for certain, as I go racing towards the uncertain and promising future: this was the most tremendous experience of my life. The worst day, the worst meal, the worst seat in the room still towered above any of my most speculative expectations. I have not a favorite experience, but a favorite feeling: the overwhelming awe of it all.