

Kate Carpenter, OK – 2019

When I was in elementary school, my favorite novel was a book written by R.J. Palacio titled *Wonder*. The closing line of the book reads “I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their lives.” After I read that line, I longed to achieve just that: receive a standing ovation. Seven years later, after many failed attempts, a feeling of immeasurable joy greeted me as 103 of the country’s most esteemed students responded to my keynote speech by rising to their feet. But, as great as this one moment was, my week in D.C. cannot be fully described by that one memory, because every second during Washington Week was greeted with that same feeling of immeasurable joy.

The atmosphere that met us students at the United States Senate Youth Program’s (USSYP) Washington Week was unlike any other experience. Students from across the country gathered in one city with the same goal; not to win or to compete, but rather, to make memories and gain experiences. Because of this positive and unique mindset, students voiced continual support and encouragement for fellow delegate’s ideas and accomplishments.

However, there were a few conversations that were unexpected, yet, have forever changed my life. These surprising conversations were not with other students, but rather, with adults. I expected to spend a week in D.C. being looked upon disdainfully by politicians because of my age. Yet, as I engaged in dialogue with these elected officials, I realized that because of this program, delegates were looked upon as esteemed. From hearing my senator tell me that I am a leader, to the president shaking my hand and saying to me “it’s an honor to meet you,” I truly realized that this program cultivates an immaculate element of encouragement.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines home as the social unit formed by a family living together; however, I define home differently. My home is spending late nights laughing in the mezzanine. My home is watching fellow high school students ask elected officials thoughtful questions. My home is singing songs on the bus for hours on end. My home is USSYP.

To the Hearst Foundations, respected officials, and my fellow delegates, thank you.