

Justin Thach, OR – 2019

My memories of Washington Week are interwoven with a haze of disbelief. As I sit to write, just short of a month later, I still struggle to comprehend the magnitude of the opportunity that all 104 of us were afforded. The places. The artifacts. The speakers. The dinners. These memories evoke a quintessential sense of “too good to be true”.

People, at first, described these experiences as “once-in-a-lifetime” and it turns out that many of them truly were. After all, it’s not every day that we get to eat dinner next to the original Constitution while asking questions of a prominent U.S. senator. Or listening to and speaking with Chief Justice John Roberts under the same sacred roof that oversaw *Brown v. Board of Education*. Or hearing Martha Raddatz’ take on the state of modern media as a news anchor herself. Or later watching yourself on C-SPAN being interviewed by the network’s founder. These experiences were priceless and the memories irreplaceable. I do hope, though, that some of them might one day become twice-in-a-lifetime, thrice-in-a-lifetime, or even whole lives unto themselves.

But Washington aspirations aside, there is one aspect of my experience that week which I wholly refuse to allow to be once-in-a-lifetime: the people. I find it hard to imagine many other groups in this world filled with the same combination of wonderment, civility, and intent. The events and venues were captivating, but there was no time when the brilliance of peers was more evident than the moments in between: bus rides turned loud by our very heated (yet very respectful) debate. Post-dinner conversations with people who brought with them the utmost of passions for community organizing. Here, no topics were off limits and no opinions were ignored, so long as one could justify them.

That is not to say that we always agreed. In fact, we probably learned the most during moments of healthy criticism and argument. And these moments were not confined to ourselves, either, for no one is (or was, rather) untouchable. We questioned the speakers, both in our heads and aloud. In the most regal of settings, we sought the truth with one sharp question after another: the Uyghurs in China? Workable, tangible alternatives to the Green New Deal? Plans for 2020? The most desired of answers were just within our reach. And we did get some of them. It was exhilarating.

My most memorable experience that week, however, was a calm conversation I had with a friend. During lunchtime at a Senate office building as we prepared to go to the White House later on, we stumbled upon the topic of religion. She was a devoted Christian, and I’m identified as agnostic.

There was really nothing spectacular about the topics that we discussed, but what stuck with me was the degree of respect and calmness that permeated our conversation. Though the topic was loaded, our conversation was more honest, unabridged, and open-minded than any other conversation that I’d ever had. There was no self-censorship or careful traipsing across topics. We were both united in our desire to question and learn to the fullest extent — and at the end of this program, all 104 of us stood as a family, united by that very same desire.

The United States Senate Youth Program was a celebration of potential — an ode to greatness in the making within each of my fellow delegates. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for this opportunity to find purpose in service, family in strangers, and unity in diversity. I will never forget it.