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No matter how many times I flip through my notes, it is impossible to encapsulate Washington Week in merely an essay. Washington Week was breathtaking, powerful, and totally life-changing. As with all life experiences, some of the memories may fade. I may forget the exact details of a speech or the intense sweetness of the iconic Capitol dome dessert. However, Washington Week is special because it fundamentally changed who I am – which is something that will stay with me forever.

When I learned that I would be representing Vermont at the United States Senate Youth Program, I was ecstatic, but a little anxious. A part of me felt insecure about my small-town accomplishments in a group of the most brilliant students in the nation. What I quickly realized was that rather than feeling insecure, I should embrace the opportunity to grow. Throughout Washington Week, my ideas were challenged, my beliefs were provoked, and my imagination was energized. Each moment — whether it was on the bus or over breakfast — was filled with thoughtful conversation about everything from tax reform to philosophy. My fellow delegates inspired me with their innovation, passion, and intelligence; each of them bringing a unique perspective to the table. Washington Week challenged me to be better, think bigger, and do more to change the world. Ever since, I am not afraid to try to do what I previously didn't think was possible.

Washington Week also transformed my outlook on public service. Public service to me was simply, government work. After hearing from many accomplished government officials, I understood that public service is much, much more than that. One speaker I particularly enjoyed was Brian Kamoie, Associate Administrator of FEMA. I was inspired by his unconditional dedication to saving lives during disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the H1N1 pandemic, but also, his message of integrity. Public service is not just about serving the public; it is about doing what we believe is right, even if it isn't easy. As Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough perfectly worded it, "If everyone is happy, you're not doing your job right." I believe that each of us has an obligation to fight for what we stand for, and in this sense, public service can be a part of all of our lives. Although some of us delegates will not enter a profession of public service in a governmental sense, we can still serve the public by always striving to do the right thing. I will always remember Mr. Kamoie's advice to never, ever compromise your integrity.

I can't forget to mention the lessons of gratitude that arose during the program. After Chief Justice Roberts eloquently spoke about appreciating the people who come before you, I thought about all the people who helped me get to where I was, sitting right there in the Supreme Court. I met eyes with my fellow delegates, Military Mentors, and representatives of the Hearst Foundations, who all made Washington Week as incredible as it was. I thought about my family, friends, and community, who encouraged me to always pursue my ambitions. Although a purpose of the United States Senate Youth Program is to celebrate our own accomplishments, it is important to thank all of the people who help us achieve these accomplishments and utilize our privilege to help others do the same. One of our final visits of the trip was to Arlington National Cemetery, which prompted another overwhelming feeling of gratitude. As I gazed across rows upon rows of white headstones, I sincerely understood that freedom isn't free. Thousands of men and women have sacrificed their lives to protect the American institutions that give us the power to speak up about wrongdoings. We must remember to be humble, fulfill our obligations to speak up, and always say thank you.

I am forever grateful for the infinite ways that Washington Week has shaped who I am and who I will be. I can't wait to see all that my fellow delegates and I will accomplish.