

Adam Pack, WV – 2019

I'm not supposed to be here — to be this lucky — as I thought one night while eating an extravagant dinner right next to the Constitution in the Rotunda of the National Archives where I heard from one of the nation's pre-eminent senators, Richard Blumenthal. I had this feeling of awe and wonder many times a day and it has not left me since. From feeling like a celebrity as the "paparazzi" constantly took photos of our group to dining on three course meals for lunch and dinner, this experience was truly remarkable. As I am reflecting on my week in Washington, I have come to reminisce on experiences and reinforce many ideas that I heard from our esteemed speakers. While I could not fit in everything I wanted to include, here are some of my favorite moments from my week in the capital city.

Almost every speaker reiterated the platitude of the need for an increased bipartisanship in the Senate and the government overall, but I thought the Senate Historian, Dr. Betty Koed, presented it with the most enthusiasm and urgency. After hearing her lecture on the dubious passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, in which she called the Senate Judiciary Committee, "the graveyard of civil rights legislation," she emphasized that our government has been faced with more daunting challenges than today and it has the ability to flourish if both sides work together for the common good. I loved that she said, "Bipartisanship is the key to success." To a room full of diverse young people who hold many contrarian political opinions, she reminded us that there are certain issues where both sides must work together for the good of the country.

I'll never forget walking up the endless steps into the Supreme Court building, seeing all the history and tradition that has shaped our country since its founding. The spectacular decor, with engravings of the history of law from Hammurabi's Code to the famous row of nine chairs, sent waves of euphoria through me. I had never imagined that such a room could be so grand and momentous. When Chief Justice John Roberts came through a door in the back, my jaw dropped — not because of his esteemed position, but because of his rhetoric and personality. He reminded us that people in Washington are real humans too. He was more humble and down-to-earth than most people who have accomplished less than half of what he has done. His promise to never look back at his judicial decisions and focus only on the cases present at hand, revealed to me not to dwell on past failures, but to focus on what I can achieve in the present. The radical empathy he displayed as he said, "I see the likeness of God in every human face," comforted me in knowing that the Supreme Court will be in good hands while he remains chief justice.

I again felt this incredible feeling of luck and awe when I gave appreciation remarks for the Italian Ambassador to the United States, Armando Varricchio. I had the distinct honor to dine at the center table with members of the Hearst family, members of the Hearst Corporation, and members of the Italian embassy. It would be an understatement to say I felt out of place to dine with such powerful people, but this what the program is all about — where high school students get to interact with people of power and influence. The ambassador's statements on the necessity of the European Union and the rejection of an isolationist foreign policy encouraged me to pursue international relations in college. As someone who is interested in joining the foreign service one day, it was truly an eye-opening experience to question and interact with a leader in the field.

Through the United States Senate Youth Program, I gained a renewed sense of respect for the role of the military in society and in government. My Military Mentor, Captain Prashar, became a role model for me during my time with him in Washington. He always

displayed the utmost respect for everyone and showed me a personal side to the military that I had never seen before. From never having anyone in my close family serve in the military and not knowing any military service members personally, it was amazing to get to connect with someone so brave and selfless as Captain Prashar. I went from a lukewarm sense of respect for the military to a firm belief in the necessary and utmost respect for our armed forces all in one week!

In retrospect, I believe this program fundamentally changed my outlook on politics and the people who hold public office today. I admit I used to be very cynical about my Senator, Joe Manchin. In fact, I even voted for his opponent in the 2018 midterms! During Washington Week, he displayed an unnecessary kindness to me that I will always carry with me. Unfortunately, Senator Manchin had a conflict the night of the Senate Reception — the “superbowl” as we like to call it — so, he personally invited me and my co-delegate to his office on Capitol Hill that morning. While some delegates had neither senator show up to the reception, I had a senator who not only informed me ahead of time that he would not be able to make it, but personally invited me to his office and congratulated me on my accomplishment! He even called my grandfather from my phone, but that’s a story for another time! My interaction with my senator revealed to me that kindness and civility still exist in Washington — even from the people we might disagree with politically.

The overarching message of the program towered over me when Brian Kamoie, the director of FEMA, quoted the late poet Mary Oliver, saying, “What is it you plan to do with your wild and precious life?” He emphasized that the delegates in the room need to commit to serve the United States of America and to take bold action to fix the issues plaguing our country today. He made me realize that public service to the country is more important than the selfish ambitions I may have for myself. I loved that he said to never compromise your integrity and the values you hold. Even though he definitely was not the headliner of Washington Week, I can definitely say his speech had the greatest impact on me. After all, it is not the position that makes an individual credible to an audience, it is their passionate and direct words, willingness to answer tough questions, and radical honesty that left the greatest mark on me.

Although meeting the president of the United States in the White House and getting to walk through the labyrinthine hallways of the Pentagon was an experience I’ll never forget, what I can honestly say about what impacted me the most during Washington Week was the awesome diversity and energy of my fellow delegates. We may come from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Educational Activity and hold views all over the political spectrum from the socialist left to the radical right, but we developed a steadfast belief in civilized debate and respect that I know will stick with us as we go through our careers. The current leadership in Washington has failed to establish a sense of decency and in politics, but I have faith that the members of the 2019 United States Senate Youth Program will work to change this toxic climate to a climate where dignity is expected, not eschewed.

I can’t say thank you enough to the Hearst Foundations for paying all of the expenses for this trip. Because of this program I found my voice defending positions I felt previously nothing about. Because of this program I was able to develop life-long friends that I am meeting this summer for a reunion. Because of this program I was able to finally fit in — as a political junkie like me does not share the same interests as my high school friends. Because of this program I realized I wanted to attend college in Washington, D.C. Because of this program I found my college roommate who happens to be the guy I was assigned to room with at this program! If we roomed together successfully for a week, four years is nothing!

It's hard to believe that you can make such strong connections with people over the course of one week — where the thought of leaving them feels unimaginable. I remember thinking that I never wanted the night to end as we danced away the final evening and wrote personal notes in each other's journals. Some of us, including me, never went to sleep the final night — wanting to spend as much time as possible with the people that have become family to us. As I stepped out of the Mayflower Hotel for one last time, I felt the immense weight of sadness within me as I realized it may be years until I see some of my fellow delegates again as we head off to different universities in the fall. But I realized that when we reunite, I will get to hear about so many amazing things they have accomplished — as we are the future leaders of the country, resolute in our commitment to public service, slaving away at the problems afflicting our nation, in pursuit of making the country we love a better place for the future.