

Stanley Stoutamire, AL – 2023

“What do you want to do with your life?” has been one of the most frequently asked questions of my senior year, both internally and externally. The answers I concocted were all lacking in one way or another. The central issue was that there was no one thing that I wanted to do. I wanted to pursue a career in medicine; I wanted a future based in politics and international affairs; and I wanted to find a way to continue studying music. All of these paths clashed before me every time I attempted to carve a straight answer out of that pervasive question: “What do you want to do with your life?” And then Washington Week happened.

Suddenly, I found myself sitting in the same room as legislators of the highest caliber, adjudicators of the highest station, and distinguished students from across the nation. Among the amazing opportunities of Washington Week, the greatest gift was the peace of mind in knowing that I was not alone in my struggle to create my path.

In fact, one of the first speakers I would get to hear from would entirely reframe the way I understood that ever-present question concerning my path. Bayan Galal, United States Senate Youth Alumni Association Collegiate Affairs Leader and Yale student body president at the time, spoke to us about leadership. Specifically, she told us not to “box ourselves in by what leadership has to look like.” She herself was double majoring in Molecular, Cellular, Developmental Biology and Global Affairs, proving her very point while simultaneously resolving my reservations. Getting to see someone excel by synthesizing their passions instead of abandoning them was the first of many inspiring moments. I reframed my perspective around my future and began to envision my path wider than I ever had before.

Later, we had the honor of hearing from Senator John Hickenlooper. He spoke to us about his path, which was anything but linear. From geologist to brewer to mayor, and now United States senator, Senator Hickenlooper’s path had changed course a number of times, always leading him to where he needed to be. More than simply being in the right places at the right times, Senator Hickenlooper committed himself to be open to new opportunities and new directions for his life. That commitment has undeniably paid off in spades. Listening to Senator Hickenlooper opened my eyes to the concept of a path that was not only wide but non-linear in nature.

Throughout the week, my understanding of what the path to success looked like was constantly reshaped and upended. I learned from people that are indisputably successful that at the end of the day, as important as goals are, you don’t have to have it all planned out at 18. Or 21. Or 37. Or ever. What you do need, is the ability to evaluate a situation and make a timely decision. As Senator Hickenlooper’s son said to him, “Get the facts. Make a decision. Check. Done.” However, getting to “Check. Done.” is, for lack of a better phrase, easier said than done. General Mark Milley gave us a more comprehensive decision-making framework by outlining his own. 1. Identify the problem. 2. Recognize your options. 3. Evaluate your courses of action. 4. War game it. 5. Make your informed decision. He also reminded us to “guard against” mirror imaging, confirmation bias, and groupthink. This advice, paired with my new understanding of how to envision my future, allowed me to feel confident in not chasing a specific destination for my life, but exploring the many different paths that I know will be a part of my life.

“What do you want to do with your life?” is still a difficult question for me to answer. I still do not have a definitive answer to that question. However, during Washington Week, I learned how I answer that question does not have to be one thing. I don’t have to compartmentalize who I am to fit into any one path. Being able to share in this revelation with many of my fellow delegates made the experience even more profound. The college admissions process can be incredibly intense, consuming, and isolating. Knowing that your peers are wrestling with the same big questions as you can help chip away at those feelings of isolation and make navigating the transition to college just a little bit more manageable. I am so grateful that I was able to participate in Washington Week, a truly life-altering experience that led to friendships greater than oceans, unparalleled wisdom from our nation’s leaders, and new horizons that I can’t wait to explore.