

Will Nelson, ND – 2023

You are defined by the people you choose to spend your time with. Since the conclusion of my experience in Washington, I have pondered this phrase. Our week, while structured, was defined by the leadership of our Military Mentors, the questions we asked, the monuments we toured, and the advice offered by our diverse variety of speakers. Above all, it was defined by our peers. We made friends, shared our stories, and our intertwined relationships began to form what would become the tapestry of our experience. Each delegate, unique in their own right, contributed to a larger community that defines our class.

Washington Week brought together a wide breadth of leaders from across the political spectrum. Most espoused the principle of bipartisanship and heralded its benefits. While listening to these speakers, I would briefly look around the table at my peers. A staunch Republican activist sat beside me while the chair of a High School Democrats club passed him the cream for his coffee. Throughout the meal, they laughed, exchanged ideas, and compared life experiences. Their differences provided an opportunity to learn, rather than to exploit—something that happens all too often in our modern politics. Throughout and after Washington Week, I found new friends in the most unlikely people. The Senate Youth Program provided us with an eye-opening forum that broke down the seemingly impenetrable walls of political partisanship.

Many of our speakers remarked about the accomplished nature of the delegates. The relationships we formed are not exclusively personal, but also an opportunity for future professional exchanges. Despite our variety of interests, we all aspire to become public servants and leaders. In the near future, we could share solutions for mutual problems in our communities, assist each other in finding a job, or collaborate on working for a greater cause. The future, if we work together, is what we make of it. Justice Sotomayor remarked to us, “One of you will replace me and that’s enough for me.” She has put her faith in our ability to create a future worth striving for.

Before the U.S. Senate Youth Program, my optimism had taken a toll on me. Politics began to seem like an endless pursuit of goals that were never assuredly won. No law seemed impervious despite my lobbying, no politician was assured to win with the help of my phone banking, and no right or liberty felt guaranteed or untouchable. I was beginning to lose hope. The speakers, delegates, and advice shared during Washington Week reinvigorated that hope. Regardless of ideology, I now know that America’s current and future leaders care about the issues they fight for and the constituents they serve. Politics is not an absolute, but rather a right of citizenship. Like the discussions at our meals, we need to respect differing opinions, even if we fundamentally disagree with them. Citizenship is the ability to find a friend in your most vehement of political opponents and take pride in your shared, united nation. Senate Youth helped me realize the endless need for public service, even if the reward isn’t immediately measurable or personally gratifying.

For me, Washington Week will be defined by the people I met. I will remember the advice we were offered, the friends I made, the new perspectives I gained, and the guidance provided by our Military Mentors. While the path ahead is uncertain, I have a renewed commitment to others and the people in my community. The diverse talents and personalities of each delegate give me hope for what America’s future might look like. With the help of the U.S. Senate Youth Program, we are all better equipped to tackle the problems of today and to forge a new America tomorrow.