

Keshav Sriram, OH – 2023

Washington Week was unlike any other experience I've had in my life thus far. Besides being treated like a king for a week and now really wishing I was back there, I got to meet extremely accomplished individuals, both delegates and speakers alike. These individuals solidified my yearning in life: to make a positive change in the world through public service and civic engagement within my community.

Throughout the week, we went from the Kennedy Center to the Russell Senate Office Building, where we met the secretary and parliamentarian of the U.S. Senate. After that, we visited the Library of Congress and arrived at the Supreme Court of the United States for a discussion with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

My discussion with Justice Sotomayor had to be one of the most formative experiences of my life thus far. Her main lessons surrounded a few quotes she told us. The first was "If you don't know something, ask." She delved into how people have become complacent with not figuring things out fully and settling for "half" of the full picture. She asserted that real change occurred when people really dug deep and asked questions about the things they don't know but want to learn about.

Secondly and thirdly, "Don't be complacent with just an 'I don't know,'" and "If you see something wrong, try to fix it. Get involved." These quotes tied into the first lesson, in the aspect that people often settle for subpar standards because they don't wish to take initiative. This ties into an apparent lack of motivation, and it's something that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationwide, we're seeing children and adults alike not being able to focus on their work because of a lack of motivation that originated from the pandemic. To combat this, we have to work towards building back that motivation to learn and build back our curiosity by asking ourselves "Why?" 5 times, and then asking ourselves "And then what?" By doing this, Justice Sotomayor told us that she was able to find her drive and what kept her going. She told us that was her "Eureka Moment!" Overall, hearing about her story growing up in the Bronx, and living in a single-parent household for most of her life, inspires me to pursue a career in public service to really give a voice to the communities that are continuing to be suppressed.

Next stop on our action-packed week of consecutive 14-hour days was a visit to the Department of Justice, then the Institute of Peace, and the Martin Luther King Memorial, before finally getting to one of the most inspiring speakers of the week. The speaker that really aligned with my passion for education reform was Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona. He came off as more human than anyone else that had presented to us thus far. He talked about his life struggles, how he was imperfect, and most importantly, he showed us that he was transparent. He talked about how important it is to be true to yourself, and that "where you put your money and time shows what type of person you are." As we talked about the meaning of this quote a little further, he opened up to us about issues that were plaguing the American people at the national level. He went on to talk about the promotion of political agendas and how false promises were being made in terms of budget allocations toward education. In the end, he looked at us and told us that if and when we get elected to office, we better put our money where our mouth is.

Now onto his next lesson, which is especially important in a high school setting. "To be good with people you have to be good with yourself." In order to have positive and healthy relationships with others, it is important to first have a positive and healthy relationship with oneself. If you have negative thoughts, low self-esteem, or unresolved emotional issues, it can be difficult to connect with others in a positive way. This is one message I will continue to champion throughout the rest of my life. Because it's only when people undergo self-discovery that they can really have a healthy relationship with themselves.

Finally, I have to give a big thank you to The Hearst Foundations, Rayne Guilford, and all of the amazing staff members and Military Mentors that made Washington Week a future bedtime story for my children. And to all of the delegates, I know that the future will be in great hands if you all are the ones leading it.