

Raven Owens, OK – 2023

“You either get on board the bus, or you get hit by the bus,” - Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

And while that quote is comedic, there's a deeper meaning behind what she's saying. We are not here to be bystanders in our own lives. We're not here to sit around and wait for our problems to solve themselves. Change starts with you and me. Washington Week showed me this.

As a young person, it has been easy to get discouraged by the prevalence of bad news in the media. It seems like every other day I hear about another school shooting, another bill to eliminate America's murky past, or another person losing faith in our democracy. When you see all these issues at once, it almost seems like nothing can be done to alleviate them. And if I'm being completely honest, I too began to think that things would stay the way they were forever.

This program is the sole reason that I don't believe that anymore. From sharing this space with 103 students who care just as much as I do about these issues to talking to everyone involved in the federal government who are tirelessly working to ensure that solutions to these issues are being made, my hope was reignited. Some people in particular who touched me include Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. These speakers, and many others who spoke during Washington Week, were not just passionate about the work they are doing - they're passionate about people. They understand that life is not meant to be something you have to survive, rather, it should be something you thrive during.

In the grand scheme of things, I've learned to focus on the bigger picture. There are people hurting, there are people struggling, and there are people who are losing hope each and every single day. It is imperative for us, especially us young people, to be the ones to rekindle their hope - their belief that things can get better, their belief that things don't have to stay the way they are. When systems are failing us, we have the power to change them.

Whether it's through education, activism, politics, or community involvement, we can make a difference and create positive change in our communities and far beyond.