

Saehee Perez, VA – 2023

There are words that every delegate uses to describe Washington Week: life-changing, inspiring, eye-opening. But in my life-changed, inspired, and eye-opened perspective, I don't think it was the places we visited in Washington Week alone that led to this development.

Fancy buildings like the United States Institute of Peace, the Capitol, and National Archives were appealing to the eye, but as a Northern Virginia local, I sometimes thought about how I could come back to most of these venues anytime. That helped me focus on the fact that buildings last longer than people, and the connections that we made mattered more than the buildings we stepped foot in.

I don't even mean in a networking capacity—I mean becoming lifelong friends with the most passionate, driven, and intelligent young people I have ever met. I mean being able to chat with Steve Cox at dinner and learn about how public service ties into managing Goodwill stores across Virginia. I mean being able to hear from Rayne Guilford about how meticulously she planned our meals from the food, to the chairs, to the color of our tablecloths.

President Biden may have stood us up, but I think being able to talk with future leaders in public health and policy like Bayan Galal can be more impactful than asking someone (whose job includes maintaining a public image) some questions about being president.

Ambassador Hogan showed us the power of language and diplomacy. It can make us not only future leaders of our country, but also future leaders of the world. Secretary Cardona showed us the need for equitable education through challenging complacency. It can make the difference between a young ESOL student slipping through the cracks and that student feeling empowered to pursue higher education. Justice Sotomayor showed us that we are an expert in our own lived experiences. It helps us understand how laws can impact each of us in different ways. General Mark Milley showed us the need for responsibility in controlling the world's most well-funded military program. And that he could have any of us on our knees begging for our lives in 48 hours (self-proclaimed).

But most of all, the delegates demonstrated the power of vulnerability and peer empowerment. When I sat down at dinner on arrival day, one of my most recurring thoughts were, "why am I here?" In a room of 103 other high school students, each of whom has a long list of accomplishments, I felt like I didn't belong. And yet, so did most of the other delegates I talked to that first night. As the week went on, I noticed that the moment I was vulnerable about how I felt, I instantly bonded with whoever I was talking to. Moreover, the consistent cheering for other delegates after every introduction and appreciation remark signified that we are leaders who cheer for others. From sending pictures of our prom dresses to the girls group chat, to cheering for each other through good and bad personal news, the delegates fostered a community of empowerment that will allow us to be the best leaders we can be.

As we transition into college (or senior year, for the infinitely impressive juniors), I cannot be more excited to see where everyone ends up. What issues will we advocate for? Who will be the next mastermind behind a hot-button bill in Congress? When will we see one of us running for public office?

That said, I know for a fact that most of my fellow delegates have passions outside of politics. Because of that, I hope to see them as servant leaders in a range of fields, not just public policy and law. We need public servants leading agencies like NASA and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission as much as we need them in the DOJ or State Department.

More often than not, we confine ourselves to an idea that we need to have everything figured out—especially as the high-achieving, “nation’s top students.” It’s fine (and great) if you have a set 10-year plan, but it’s also just as fine and great if you don’t. Being first matters less than being impactful, effective, and generous. I think if there’s one thing Senator Hickenlooper taught us, it’s that our path never has to be linear, as long as we are always working for the good of the people wherever we are.

Nothing we did during Washington Week will matter if we don’t apply the life-changing, inspiring, and eye-opening knowledge that we have gained with the people that we have met.