

## Cooper Antczak, WI – 2024

Let me tell you about faith.

Somewhere in northwestern Wisconsin, an hour off the Interstate, politicians are spoken like they are made of marble: Immutable. Unintelligible. Seen, but not heard. Year after year, as margins on farms continue to thin and communities reel from decreasing population, dissatisfaction turns to anger. Disappointment turns to resentment.

We are losing our faith.

Washington Week came to me not just as an extraordinarily unique opportunity, but a chance of peace in a time of crisis. I, like the rest of my delegates, came to Washington an avid follower of politics, but still somehow carried those sentiments with me: the idea that government, an instrument of, by, and for the people of a changing society, had somehow become an association of statues, no less unchanging and unapproachable than those my community spoke about.

I was wrong.

Monday morning, hearing from Secretary Pete Buttigieg, both a prolific leader and a personal idol of mine, these perspectives shattered. To be referenced not just as a member of a broader American public, but as a group of some of the most dedicated young leaders brought a closeness and familiarity with a public figure I could have never even imagined. To hear Secretary Buttigieg speak of his struggles with identity and experiences in leadership allowed me to personally connect and understand the motivations that drove his political career. I felt seen. I felt heard.

Every moment spent in those iconic landmarks of American democracy— the Supreme Court, the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, the *White House*— not only simply amazed me, but literalized these spaces as living environments in which the future of our nation is at stake. It made these spaces approachable. It made them real. To have memories of watching the State of the Union with some of my greatest friends in the White House is not only still surreal, but gave me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of experiencing the beauty of American democracy and political participation.

But those moments of what can only be described as humanity come to the forefront of my memory of Washington Week: Justice Elena Kagan speaking about hunting with Justice Antonin Scalia, Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden joking about social media and Lizzo, and President Joe Biden recalling being caught shaving before starting his Senate bid calmly reminded me that these people— figures gracing headlines on newspapers and the television back home— are people all the same.

Because deeper than the wisdom, written into the very words our speakers said was the beauty of perspective: the understanding that our leaders are not made of marble, but of flesh and bone, who have lived a wealth of experiences that have brought to light their own opinions, beliefs, and values that guide their decision-making. The diversity in perspectives shown during Washington Week allowed me to understand not only issues that prevail nationwide, but to understand the gamut of perspectives in solving them: Representative Emanuel Cleaver

enlightened me to the extent of gentrification in Kansas City, while Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke showed me the intense work it takes to uphold our civil rights.

This diversity, of course, brought a spectrum of political opinions to our week. And Washington Week was only underscored by a theme of bipartisanship: Co-founder of Braver Angels Bill Doherty and Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough both spoke of the importance of working together beyond party lines. It is natural to disagree; the United States Senate Youth Program, however, taught me that it takes a leader to recognize and validate the experiences that build those perspectives. I learned to see not an affiliation, but an entire person. I learned to listen to experiences. I learned to understand.

Humans are fallible. We are not made of stone, nor are our decisions equally rigid and logical as we would hope to believe. Politics is a system built on emotion, lived experience guiding the principles we seek to govern ourselves by. To have faith in that system, a system built on the mere premise of the fallibility and irrationality of human emotion and opinion, is a deceptively large undertaking we ask of every American.

The United States Senate Youth Program restored my faith in that system. It helped me see that my community and I cannot judge civil leaders on the basis of logic in a complex and emotional system. We cannot accuse politicians of being unchanging or uncommunicative if we do not strive to begin those conversations in the first place. Before we can communicate, we have to understand.

So when I speak of not just our public leaders, but of our community members, of my friends, my experiences in Washington will continue to remind me to remember not the beliefs, but the person behind them. And not just for the memories of Washington and the opportunities to speak with some of the most influential leaders in the nation, but for that essential perspective of humanity, I can only say thank you.