

Darryl Long - FL

The United States Senate Youth Program Washington Week was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Not many people are granted the access to the minds and the institutions of Washington D.C. to the extent that we were during that week. During that amazing week, we had the opportunity to visit the judicial branch, the legislative branch, the executive branch, the state department, and the pentagon. We also had the opportunity to speak with some of the highest profiles and greatest minds in Washington, including Justice Sotomayor, Senator Casey of Pennsylvania, Senator Dorgan of North Dakota, President Obama, Secretary Sebelius, Under Secretary Steinberg, and Deputy Secretary Lynn.

The two greatest moments of my trip were meeting the President of the United States in the White House and meeting Senator George Lemieux. On both occasions the anticipation of the delegates within the room was tangible. During the visit with the President, you could feel everyone's hearts pounding as we waited and when he walked out of the elevator the group let out the biggest yelp that I have ever heard. He answered some great questions and provided great advice for those who aspire to be in his position one day, and what he emphasized was to strive to do what you want to do, not be who you want to be. This might be one of the greatest pieces of advice that I have ever received in my life, and now just thinking about that moment in the White House makes me feel inspired for the years ahead.

Still, while it was an amazing to see the President of the United States and meet my state Senator, the highlight of my week was the fellow students from around the country and the military mentors that I met during this amazing experience. On the first day as soon as I stepped off the bus and walked into the Colonial Room of the Mayflower, students were already taking part in a heated debate about issues facing the United States. At that moment I knew the week was going to be special and a chance for me to hear the opinions of other politically educated minds from all walks of life. Every day my roommate put my opinions to the test as we debated everything from abortion to healthcare to gun control. Still even though I had different opinions than many of the other delegates in the end we all became great friend similar to the Senators on Capitol Hill.

Another irreplaceable experience was delegate interactions with the military mentors. My military mentor, Major Randolph, had a profound effect on the purpose of my life. His story about escaping the destructive influences of Baltimore helped me find the issue in the United States that I am going to strive to correct for the rest of my life, education. While Major Randolph helped me find my hidden passion, education reform, the military mentors allowed us to see a side of our servicemen that we usually don't see. Whether it was discussing movies with Major Upton or dancing with the military mentors on the last evening, getting a chance to informally interact with these professional, esteemed people was a great experience in itself.

Washington week may be the greatest experience of my life. That week I experienced things that I had never experienced before, including fine dining, an orchestra, and high profile government officials. Since that amazing week I know that Washington D.C. is where I want to spend the rest of my life and the only question is how and when I will return. Washington week is something that will never be replicated for the rest of my life, and I am thankful for the Hearst Foundation for providing me with the opportunity of this life changing experience.