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My attendance as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program was an incredible experience. The opportunity to have a “behind-the-scenes” look at Washington, D.C. was a week that I will treasure for a lifetime. There were countless unforgettable moments: meeting with senators, touring various monuments and museums, and meeting President Obama and Associate Justice Sotomayor, were just a few.

The memorials were also very touching; I was especially moved by the Korean and Vietnam War Memorials. Having the opportunity to spend time there, accompanied by members of our military, was amazing. In that moment, appreciation for those brave men and women who have served, and are serving, our country flooded through me, and I will not ever be the same. I also loved the Newseum; it was a great start to the week and got me thinking about how influential the media is in our society. The Pulitzer Prize photos were especially impressive to me. Upon entering that gallery there is a quote that says, “If it makes you laugh, if it makes you cry, if it rips out your heart, that’s a good picture.” This was said by Eddie Adams, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer. That proved to be very true, and was characteristic of several events throughout the week.

Going to historic buildings and memorials, as well as meeting so many influential people who are currently making history, was awe-inspiring. It added fuel to the flame that is burning inside me—a flame that has created a passion and desire to make a difference, serve my community and country, and try to change the world.

I laughed as our wonderful speakers told stories, as I shared adventures with my fellow delegates, and as I stayed up late talking to my roommate and the young women in my military mentor group. I cried as I was touched by others’ experiences, as I felt patriotism and love for my country, and as I bid a tearful good-bye to a hundred new friends our last night together.

After meeting the directors, my co-delegates, and the phenomenal military mentors, I realized that the patriotic flame burns in all of us. Washington Week provided an opportunity for me to form and analyze my own opinions, while still being open-minded and learning from those whose opinions and views are different from my own. It is an indescribable feeling to have the opportunity to speak with dozens of youth who are just as interested in government as I am and who want to make a difference as badly as I do.

As I spoke to the other delegates, I realized I was speaking with future mayors, city council members, cabinet secretaries, senators, and maybe even a president. This was a humbling thought, and I feel very lucky to have associated with these fine people. I created friendships and bonds during Washington Week that now stretch across the country and that will serve me well as I prepare myself for future service.