

Grace Keating – RI

*Once upon a time, in a far-off kingdom, there lived an ordinary girl. She was not a princess. Even if she had been, she may not have liked it very much, for this kingdom was so devastatingly small. For years, this average girl held special dreams of changing the world, and doing so by changing things up in the only-slightly-larger kingdom of Washington, D.C. On one cold December afternoon, she learned that she would be granted her one biggest wish. The following March, this girl was to embark on the journey of a lifetime to Washington, D.C. to come in contact with countless amazing speakers and perhaps more importantly, other ordinary dreamers like herself. She packed her bags, boarded an un-magical train, and experienced a magical week...*

I am that girl. My “kingdom” is Rhode Island, and my dreams are her dreams. I signed up for the scholarship on whim, was barely expecting to make it through the first round of the selection process, and somehow found myself in a board room of the Rhode Island Department of Education explaining my role as Senior Class President to four strangers. Weeks later, I was counting down the days until March 6, 2010 in anticipation of the beginning of Washington Week.

The week began with an “easy day” of museums and memorials. This was indeed a good way to get us delegates accustomed to the tight schedule of the program and to allow us to see some of the amazing city. The following days were chock-full of speakers: Judge Robert Henry, Parliamentarian Alan Furmin, Senate Secretary Nancy Erickson, Chief of Preparedness Policy Brian Kamoie, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, *Washingtonian* editor Garret Graff, several employees of the State Department, Senators Lugar, Dorgan, and Cochran, Indian Ambassador Meera Shankar, Senate Historian Don Ritchie, Secretary of Health and Human Service Kathleen Sebelius, CEO of C-Span Brian Lamb, and President Barack Obama, to name a few. All were fabulous. I learned more in a given day than I ever could in weeks of any class at any school. For not only did I learn about these amazing people and their positions, I learned that they struggled too. They came from utterly small “kingdoms” too. They had big dreams too. And they fulfilled them.

One of my favorite speakers was Brian Kamoie, because his job is so important and so very interesting. He had a great presence with us as teenagers. Ambassador Meera Shankar answered her questions so honestly, even though they were probably the toughest to answer. Her account of India, its past, and its future absolutely fascinated me. Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota was easily the most inspirational speaker of the week, encouraging us to say ‘yes’ to every opportunity that confronts us in life. His insight that ideas are more powerful than guns moved me to desire change and peace in this world even more. Our trips to the Newseum and the National Gallery of Art were a break from the harsh schedule of speakers and incredibly informative as well. They were a vital cultural dimension to the program. Lastly, and I believe everyone’s favorite speaker of the week, was Mr. Barack Obama. Seeing him in front of us, in three dimensions, not just on TV or in the newspaper,

was certainly an experience we will never forget. He may have been tired. He should have been tired. He had every right to rush us along, as he had the Joint Chiefs of Staff waiting for him upstairs. Instead, Mr. Obama took pictures, shook hands, answered questions in great detail about his life philosophy, and even comforted Jessica from Louisiana, who had tears in her eyes. He allowed us a glimpse into his life, his family, his goals – a glimpse which many Washington elite will never see. I will remember our fifteen minutes with Barack Obama for the remainder of my life.

I carried a legal pad with me everywhere we travelled, earning the title of “the journalist” from a Massachusetts delegate. Looking at its tattered yellow pages now, I can do nothing but smile. On March 9, I wrote, “The caliber of conversation opened here is increasingly incredible with every day.” I have excerpts within from each Speaker we heard, as well as my own commentary on nearly everything. There are lists of books to read, a suggestion of a revolt in Belarus to research, a page filled with drawings by a military mentor, and a rather large “I am so tired,” carved on one sheet. I clearly remember waiting outside the Senator-Delegate reception on Wednesday night watching everyone mill about. The reality of the entire week seemed to hit me all at once. I wrote, “Standing atop the rotunda of the Russell Senate Office Building amongst a sea of newscasters waiting for the Senator/Delegate Reception to begin. Beautiful night. Erin the photographer is taking a picture of me writing. ...Surreal.”

*Surreal. The ordinary young girl could only describe her United States Senate Youth Program experience with this adjective. She knew no other way to sum up a week of amazing speakers, and even more amazing company in her co-dreamers. She came back renewed in her sense of passion and longing for change in her government and in her world. The girl took her experiences back to the kingdom to inform to everybody. Something she could not quite retell, however, was the camaraderie amongst her newfound dreamers. The girl now has friends in more than forty-nine other kingdoms. Their bonds stretch across land, oceans, rivers, and time. Her trip of a lifetime morphed into experiences she will always remember and friends she could never forget. It was, quite simply, magical.*