

Sarah Margulies - RI - 2011

Washington Week was the most consistently amazing 168 hours of my life. Going to sleep every night was a struggle, not because I wasn't tired enough, but because I did not want to miss a second of the action. The Hearst Foundations did an amazing job organizing the event and choosing the delegates, and I am forever in its debt for providing me with this wonderful experience.

When I was first chosen for this tremendous honor, I was a little intimidated. Once I knew that I was going to be in the same room as President Barack Obama, my heart flipped a little. And that was the same feeling I experienced when I saw him swagger (there is absolutely no other word that can describe that how that man walks) down the hallway in the White House to meet us. Yet, the speakers who actually had a greater impact on me were the ones who were slightly less well known than our POTUS. Justice Clarence Thomas, someone who I strongly disagree with on most things, amazed me with his humor and life story. He literally spent forty-five minutes answering our questions, and he did it with a grace and openness that is rare in a public official. And that was probably the thing that surprised me the most about Washington Week; that we received so much access to public officials and how open most of them were to us. They seemed to want to share their stories and their experiences with us.

This access was really represented during our lunch at the State Department. While Undersecretary Maria Otero was a brilliant speaker, the person who most impressed me was the mid-level State Department official who actually sat at our table. Peter Harrell may not be the most heralded member of the Obama administration, but his commitment to his job really shone a light on how the government cannot operate by just using politicians. He inspired me with his candor and straightforwardness, and I will never forget how as we discussed the situation in Libya; Secretary Clinton was actually meeting with her advisors on Libya to figure out a course of action to follow.

Over the course of Washington Week, we had an audience with President Barack Obama, lunch with State Department employees, and amazing guest speakers ranging from Secretary Arne Duncan to Justice Clarence Thomas. While each of these events was amazing in its own way, they were not the true highlight of Washington Week. Instead, the most important memories I have of this experience relate to my fellow delegates and the fantastic military mentors from around the country. Every conversation I had over the course of Washington Week added to my general bank of knowledge. Each person I met had a different and informed perspective on the world. And all of the good-byes that were exchanged on March 12, 2011 were heart-wrenching. We may never spend another week together in the glorious Mayflower Hotel, but there will be many USSYP reunions in the future. One day I fully expect to turn to C-SPAN to witness two of the USSYP members of my class, battling it out on Capitol Hill. And, I will laugh to myself, and realize that the Hearst Foundations' mission for our USSYP class was complete.