

Seung Kwan Baek – GA - 2011

My family visited Washington D.C. three years ago, but because our time and financial resources were limited, my “interaction” with the famous landmarks was limited to the view through the window of our 1997 Honda Civic. In March of this year, however, I truly experienced Washington D.C. as a representative of Georgia in the United States Senate Youth Program. The all-expense-paid, week-long trip even presented the opportunity to meet the President of the United States.

After arriving in Washington D.C., I met 103 other students from all over the country who shared my zeal and passion for public service and our government. Interaction and discussions with my fellow delegates of diverse backgrounds made me realize that the quest for knowledge is never-ending. Throughout the course of the week, it was significant that despite different viewpoints on issues and our abilities to discuss at great lengths, we were still friends at the end of the day, something that we do not often see in our government today.

Meeting President Obama was the pinnacle of my week in Washington D.C. He offered a new perspective on public service, explaining that one does not have to be a public servant to help others. He helped me understand that I should not focus so much on choosing a career in public service; rather, I should choose a career in which I can help others. I have always planned to be a politician because I thought that was the only way I could change our nation. I realize now that I have the power to bring about change by making an impact in my own community.

In a sense, the Washington Week was a scavenger hunt in our nation’s capital. Throughout the week, I found myself pointing out famous monuments, paintings, and people that I have seen in books, TV, and my history class. However, the greatest treasures I found during the Washington Week were humility and courage. I was taken by surprise when President Obama, Justice Clarence Thomas, and other political and business leaders apologized to us for leaving a huge financial burden on our generation. When I looked at the faces of my military mentors, I realized that despite these troubling times, there are still those who were willing sacrifice their lives to defend our country. Looking at the eager faces of the students gathered to make an impact on our nation, I realized that we must not lose hope because our “hero” generation is not afraid to take charge of our lives in this defining moment.

When I visited Washington D.C. three years ago-viewing landmarks through the car window-meeting the President of the United States seemed more like a fantasy than reality for a boy working in his parents’ store. I still work in my parents’ store to this day, but I now have a much clearer sense of direction. My participation in the United States Senate Youth Program illuminated for me the power of hard work and determination in changing fantasy to reality. Having experienced Washington D.C. under two extremely different circumstances has helped me understand the need to help those who are less fortunate.