

Elise LeCrone – MA - 2011

Before I left for Washington Week, many people asked me how I felt about going. Of course I was absolutely thrilled, but underneath my excitement, I was nervous. I had already begun speaking with many other delegates via Facebook, and everyone seemed so incredibly intelligent, well-versed in the ins and outs of seemingly every political issue. I was afraid I'd be overwhelmed, not as knowledgeable in the art of quick-witted argument as everyone else.

When I got off the plane, I was still apprehensive as I joined a group of ten or so delegates. But as we stood in the terminal waiting for our bus, I started to bond with this new group of people from all parts of the country—California, Wisconsin, Tennessee.

After laughing for an entire bus ride, we arrived at the Mayflower Hotel and entered a ballroom full of delegates, and I was once again nervous. As the evening went on, however, I met students who were different in their backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints, but they all had smiles and stories to share.

The week progressed, and as we all took part in amazing experiences, from visiting the White House to meeting our senators to just spending time in museums, I realized that I never did feel inferior or overwhelmed. I had fantastic political conversations, and sometimes debates, but what made the USSYP delegates special was that these debates were never about party divisions or ad hominem attacks. Our conversations were a meeting of minds and ideas, and I learned as much from people with whom I agreed as from those with whom I didn't.

As I was bonding with these 103 other students, I was also meeting leaders from all parts of our government. The level of access that we enjoyed was incredible; I had the opportunity to share a laugh with President Obama, get advice from Senator Kerry, and ask a question of Justice Thomas and the Turkish ambassador. One of the most important things I realized during Washington Week is that the leaders of our nation are all regular people at heart, with strengths and weaknesses and emotions just like anyone else. And in realizing this, in my small moments of connection with these leaders, I became vividly aware of the reality and power of a government of, by, and for the people. This realization also gave me hope, that for all the disagreements our leaders have, they are all capable of kindness and cooperation, much the same as the 104 USSYP delegates from all across the political spectrum.

Washington Week, for me, was a week of building connections with the leaders who spoke with us and taught us about their experiences, and with the other delegates, whose experiences perhaps taught me the most. I know that these bonds, whether fleeting or enduring, have made an indelible impact on me. The lessons I learned from USSYP, whether in a reception room of the State Department or the halls of the Pentagon or the hotel hallway late at night, will be lessons I carry with me always.