

Samantha DeRidder - WI - 2011

How many times can an adjective be used until it loses its significance? There comes a point when that word must be replaced by a new one in order to convey the full intended meaning. Because of the United States Senate Youth Program's Washington Week, one word just might be in need of a replacement: "Amazing."

For me, the inevitable overuse of the word began when I received a UPS package in the mail mid-December. I was napping after a long day at school when I was abruptly awakened by my father who rushed into my room with the package for me to open. A letter inside told me I was selected to represent my state during Washington Week. As tears welled in my sleepy eyes, I tried to make sense of the blurred page and wondered if I was dreaming. "This is amazing," is all I managed to say.

The week was a whirlwind adventure. I visited the Smithsonian, Newseum, and the National Museum of Art. I saw the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Vietnam Memorial, and my personal favorite, The Lincoln Memorial. I set foot inside many remarkable buildings including the Pentagon, the Supreme Court Building, the Department of State, the Capitol, the CIA Headquarters, and of course, The White House. None of these places quite struck me with the same level of emotion as Arlington Cemetery did. Arlington was one of the last places on our agendas for the week, and despite having made some of my best friends on the trip, I walked around the hollowed grounds alone. I distinctly remember the sound of jets passing by overhead and closing my tear filled eyes to silently thank God for being raised in a country where men and women serve to protect our freedom.

It is true. "Amazing" is the go-to word when it comes to describing the week. Ask any of the 104 "amazing" delegates what they thought about the trip, and they will concur. The plane ride? Amazing. The military mentors? Amazing. The luxurious Mayflower Hotel? Amazing. The gourmet food? Amazing. The Pentagon? Amazing. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier? Amazing. The numerous speakers? Amazing. The White House? Amazing. Meeting the President of the United States? AMAZING.

But perhaps the most amazing of all that I could take away from my experience with the United States Senate Youth Program is a sense of hope for the future of this country. I met extremely motivated and bright students who could very well grow up to work for the government. Each of us had absolutely different and unique beliefs, but in spite of my predictions of countless hours of arguments on politics like I had been subjected to back home, we were able to have oddly civil discussions on prevalent economic and social issues without a single raised voice and an abundance of respect. My new founded optimism lies in knowing that our country is, and will continue to be, in the hands of intelligent people who have a passion for making it better. I now have an undying gratitude to the Hearst Foundations for supplying me with a gift that inspired me to someday work on, yes, the "amazing" Capitol Hill.